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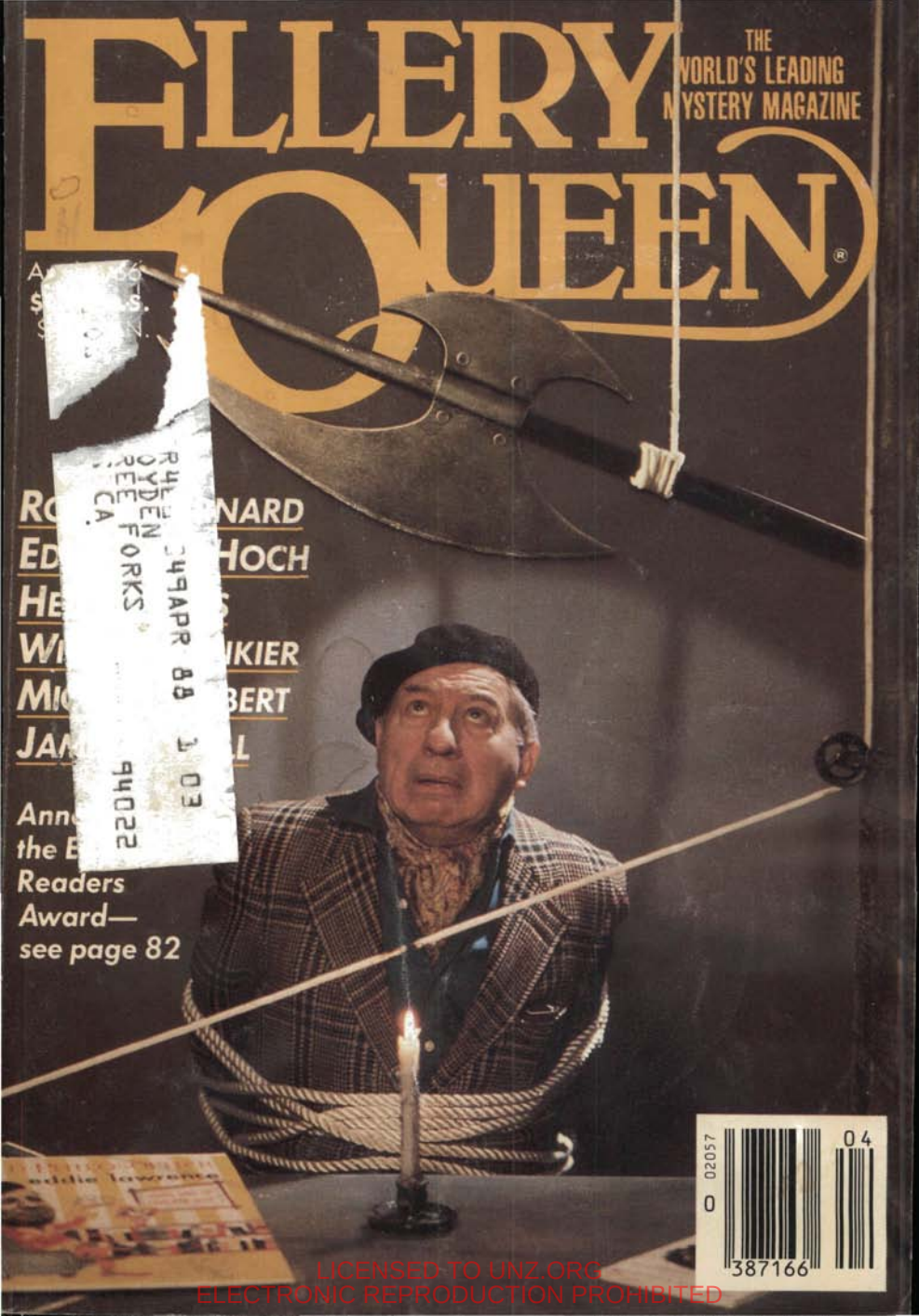

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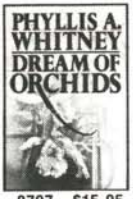

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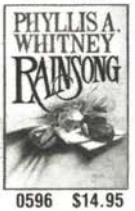

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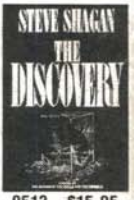

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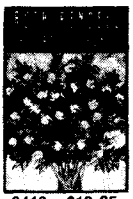

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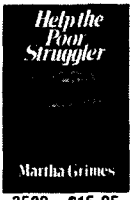

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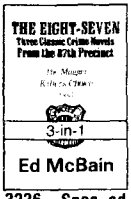

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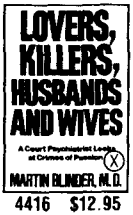

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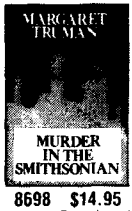

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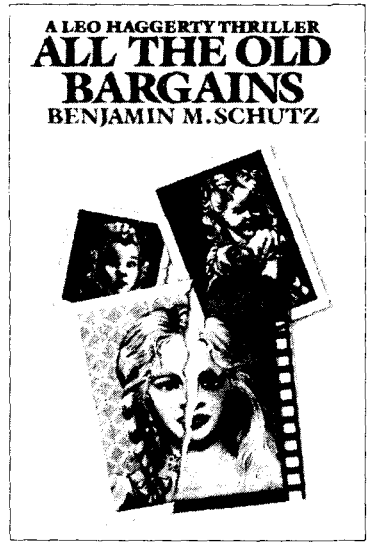

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a *NEW* Captain Leopold story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Harker Development Corporation had an entire floor at the top of the United Bank Building. A landscaped terrace ran along the south side of the building. Terrance and Ralph Harker both had large offices on that side, with sliding glass doors leading from each office onto the terrace. The body had been taken away by the time Leopold arrived and he went at once to the thirtieth floor.

Sergeant Connie Trent met him in the reception area of Harker Development. "It looks like suicide, Captain. His secretary discovered a message on the computer . . ."

CAPTAIN LEOPOLD VIEWS A CRIME SCENE

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Captain Leopold's wife Molly had been in private law practice about six months when she came to him for help. "I thought you were only handling civil cases," he said. "Don't tell me you miss your days as a public defender."

"Of course I miss them, but you know we couldn't go on like that, with me defending the very people you were arresting. I'm quite content with civil cases, drawing up contracts, arranging mergers, arguing lawsuits. Breach-of-contract suits can be fascinating and you don't have to worry about the loser spending the rest of his life behind bars."

"Is that what this case is about? A breach of contract?"

"No, nothing like that. It's the Harker brothers, Terrance and Ralph. You've heard me mention them." She poured a couple of

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after-dinner drinks and brought one to Leopold. He enjoyed their evening conversations, especially after a difficult day.

"The real-estate tycoons."

Molly nodded and took a sip of her drink. "They're involved in so many transactions it's difficult for me to follow sometimes. We've set up a new corporation in Delaware for tax purposes and we're in the process of merging with another company. At times some of it seems a bit shady to me."

"What do you mean?"

"This is off the record?"

"Of course," he assured her.

"The money to acquire this other company is being funneled through a couple of out-of-state banks in a manner that makes me think it might be laundered."

"Drug money?"

"Or organized crime. But I've no proof."

"Then I wouldn't worry about it. Aren't lawyers supposed to act in the best interests of their clients?"

"Of course." She looked pensive.

"Is there something you want me to do, Molly?"

She smiled and shook her head. "No. I'm probably being foolish—probably violating my client's confidence by even mentioning it to you."

The conversation turned to other topics and Leopold forgot about it, more or less. Only once, when she returned late from a dinner meeting with the Harkers, did he ask, "How did you manage to land such an important account when you've been with the firm just over six months? I'd have thought some of the senior partners would have wanted to handle it."

"They asked for me," she answered and laughed. "Maybe they like my style."

Leopold grunted. "Or your background in criminal law."

The Harker brothers were well known in the community and it wasn't surprising that Leopold had some slight acquaintance with the men. He saw them occasionally at one or another of the downtown restaurants when he had time for lunch someplace other than the little cafe across from headquarters. One day about a month after his conversation with Molly, he was lunching with Lieutenant Fletcher at a restaurant next to City Hall when Fletcher said, "There's Terrance Harker, the real-estate developer."

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Leopold followed his gaze to a table across the room. "And his brother Ralph. Who's the young woman with them?"

"Beats me. I'd like to meet her, though."

"You're a married man, Fletcher," Leopold said with a smile.

"So are they."

As it turned out, Ralph Harker, the younger of the brothers, lingered at the table with the woman after Terrance left. There was laughter between them and they obviously were enjoying each other's company. On the way out they passed close to Leopold's table and Ralph Harker said, "Come here, Donna—I'll introduce you to the best detective in Monroe. Captain Leopold, I want you to meet Donna Proctor, a good friend of mine."

"It's a pleasure," the woman said with a smile as Leopold stood up and introduced Fletcher. She was attractive in an unusual way, with a pug nose and a wide mouth and high cheekbones that didn't quite go together. But she knew how to use makeup and hairstyling to her best advantage and she made the most of her height, which must have been close to six feet.

"Donna's going to be doing some public-relations work for my brother and me," Ralph Harker explained. "You should be seeing our names in the local press more frequently."

"I wish you luck," Leopold told them. Donna gave him a smile as they continued on their way.

"He's an operator," Fletcher said. "Probably cheating on his wife."

Leopold shrugged and went back to his coffee and dessert. "Who knows? Maybe we will see his name in the papers."

They did, just a week later, when Ralph Harker leaped to his death from the top of the city's tallest building.

Since it had been a violent death, Captain Leopold was called to the scene as soon as it happened. Harker Development Corporation had an entire floor of offices at the top of the United Bank Building. A landscaped terrace ran along the south side of the building. Terrance and Ralph Harker both had large offices on that side, with sliding glass doors leading from each office onto the terrace. The body had been taken away by the time Leopold arrived and he went at once to the thirtieth floor.

Sergeant Connie Trent met him in the reception area of Harker Development. "It looks like suicide, Captain. His secretary discovered a message on the computer."

Leopold followed Connie into the secretary's office. Kelly O'Mera

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was an attractive auburn-haired woman in her late twenties. Her eyes were red from crying as she faced Leopold by the computer terminal that flanked her desk. "I just found this," she said, and pressed a button on the keyboard. Immediately the screen was alive with green letters:

GOODBYE, KELLY. I'M SORRY ABOUT THIS. I SIMPLY COULDN'T LIVE ANY LONGER. RALPH.

"Had he been depressed for any reason?" Leopold asked.

"No, he seemed fine this morning. I went to lunch and when I came back I saw the crowd in front of the building. I came up and—and I—" She broke down, dropping into a chair and sobbing uncontrollably.

Leopold turned to Connie. "Where did he jump from?"

"Out here." She led the way through the inner office, a dark oak-paneled room that seemed more like a gentlemen's club than a modern business office. The glass door was open and Leopold was amazed at the variety of flowers and shrubs that were growing on the terrace, thirty stories above the street.

"This is quite a place," he said, peering over the sturdy metal railing at the street below.

"Kelly says she keeps the plants watered. Harker's brother has access to the terrace, too, but he's away today."

"Oh?"

"In New York on business."

Leopold thought how only last year he'd helped a friend with the New York City Police investigate a killing in which the victim was pushed from the balcony of an apartment overlooking Central Park. Still, here there was clearly a suicide message.

Or was there?

"Miss O'Mera," Leopold called. "Could you step out here a moment?"

The moist-eyed young woman joined them. "He often came out here," she said. "He liked the plants so much. His brother always kidded him about it."

"I was wondering about the computer. Is his the only one?"

"Oh, no. His brother has one too, and his brother's secretary, and a half dozen other key people on the floor."

"Is it for internal use only?"

"No, there's a telephone line to our New York office. Anyone with the access code could reach us."

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"Then theoretically anyone in the world could have left that suicide note on the computer," Leopold said.

It was later in the day, back in his offfice on the second floor of headquarters, when the call reached him. The voice was male, middle-aged, and quite ordinary. "Captain Leopold?"

"Speaking."

"I'm calling about the death of Ralph Harker this afternoon."

"Yes?" He reached automatically for a pencil.

"My name is Maxwell and I have an office in the Waterbury Tower, facing the United Bank Building. I don't know exactly how to put this. —I think I saw someone push Harker off that terrace today."

Lem Maxwell's first name was Lemuel—"*Gulliver's Travels* was my father's favorite book," he explained with a wry smile—and he was an accountant in business for himself. His office was on the twenty-fourth floor of the 26-story Waterbury Tower. Leopold guessed him to be around forty, with the rugged look of a man who exercised regularly.

"You were looking out of this window?" Leopold asked.

"Right." Maxwell pulled up the blind for a better view. "As you can see, the bank building is a block away and we're looking up at the terrace. It's six floors higher than this, but I have a pretty good view of it." He turned from the window to face Leopold. "Around 12:30 today I saw two men come out of Ralph Harker's office. When they got near the railing they began to struggle. I couldn't identify either one at this distance, but I saw one push the other over the rail."

"The pusher couldn't have been a woman?"

Maxwell looked surprised. "It never occurred to me that it might be a woman. They were about the same height and I assumed both were men, but I couldn't really tell at this distance."

"What did you do then?" Leopold asked.

"Well, nothing," Lem Maxwell admitted rather sheepishly. "I heard the sirens and I didn't think I needed to get involved. But I just heard on the radio that it was Ralph Harker who died and the police thought it was suicide. I decided I had to tell what I saw."

"Did you know Harker?"

"Slightly. I did some accounting work for them a few years back, before they hit the big time. I've never been to their new office. Actually, I know his brother Terrance a bit better."

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"Thank you, Mr. Maxwell. You've been a great help. I'm sure we'll be calling on you again in the course of the investigation. We'll want you to make an official statement at headquarters."

"I'll be glad to help in any way I can."

Seeing Maxwell's secretary in the outer office, Leopold paused at the door. "Did you mention this to anyone at the time?"

Maxwell shook his head. "My secretary was at lunch. I told her about it when she returned."

"I'll be in touch," Leopold said.

The investigation of Ralph Harker's death stepped up over the next two days. A death certificate was withheld and Leopold let out the word that there was a witness to indicate Harker may have been pushed from the terrace. That was enough for the press to keep the story on page one. Meanwhile, Leopold had assigned Fletcher to check the movements of the other people in the office of Harker Development at the crucial period, but he'd made little progress. Most of the secretaries had been out to lunch, and with Terrance Harker away anyone could have reached the terrace through his office without being seen.

"Keep checking," Leopold said. "Try the other office on that side of Waterbury Tower, too. Someone besides Maxwell might have seen something. Get Connie to help you."

It was the second morning after Ralph Harker's death that his brother Terrance telephoned Leopold. "I think it's time we had a talk," he said. "I don't like what I'm hearing."

"I tried to see you yesterday," Leopold told him, "but they told me you were out arranging the funeral."

"I'm here now if you want to come over."

Leopold found Terrance Harker to be more serious than his younger brother. He came right to the point. "Why are you holding up Ralph's death certificate?"

"Because there's some doubt it was suicide. We have a witness who thinks he saw your brother being pushed off the terrace."

"That's ridiculous. He left a suicide message on his computer!"

"Anyone could have put that there, even over the telephone line."

"Who would want to kill my brother?"

"I have no idea. That's what we're trying to find out."

Terrance Harker leaned back in his leather swivel chair. He seemed to be studying Leopold's face. Finally he said, "The matter

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must be cleared up at once. I have an important business deal in the works. A merger that could be worth a great deal of money."

"I don't see why my investigation should delay that."

"Let me be frank, Captain Leopold. Am I a suspect in Ralph's death?"

It was Leopold's turn to study the man across the desk. Terrance Harker seemed confident and in control, but beneath his rough manner there might have been a trace of fear. "You're not a suspect at the present time, no. As I understand it, you were in New York the day your brother died."

Harker moved a letter opener a few inches to the side. "Captain, Ralph and I had a fairly standard partnership agreement as far as this business is concerned. If either of us died, his share of the business went to the surviving partner."

"What about your brother's wife?"

"Ralph was separated from Sherry, though they weren't actually divorced. She'll still get the rest of his estate. However, as you know, a convicted murderer cannot profit from his crime. If she could convince enough people that I killed Ralph, she could get his part of the business, or at least hold up settlement of the estate long enough to ruin my plans for this merger."

"I'm sure you have nothing to worry about. As soon as we check on your movements in New York on Tuesday—"

"I wasn't in New York on Tuesday."

Leopold tried not to show his surprise. "I see. Where were you?"

"Right here in Monroe. The New York meeting fell through at the last minute and I decided I was entitled to a day of rest. I simply stayed home, puttering around the house."

"Your family can verify that?"

"My wife was visiting my sons at college. I was home alone."

"I see." Leopold took out his notebook. "What about neighbors?"

"No. I saw no one."

"Were you downtown at all?"

"I told you I was home all day."

Leopold closed the notebook. "I appreciate your frankness, Mr. Harker."

Harker hesitated. "I hope you won't misunderstand what I'm about to say. This is off the record between the two of us. I'm sure you know that your wife Molly has been doing some legal work for us, through her firm."

"I'm aware of it."

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"You should also be aware that if my brother's death is not certified as a suicide, and if this investigation drags on, my merger attempt could fail. Certain business dealings might come to light which could place Molly in an unfavorable light."

Leopold felt anger building within him. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"It's simply that she helped with the transfer of certain funds in a manner that might raise questions of legal ethics. The State Bar Association—"

"I'm certain you don't want me to charge you with attempted bribery or extortion, Mr. Harker. I'd suggest we end this conversation right now."

"I—"

At that moment Terrance Harker's secretary buzzed on the intercom. "Donna Proctor is here for her luncheon appointment, Mr. Harker."

"I'll just be a minute."

Leopold got to his feet. "Our conversation has already gone on much too long. I'll talk to you again."

He left the office without waiting for Harker's response. On the way out, he passed a smiling Donna Proctor. "So good to see you again, Captain. Ralph introduced us at the restaurant last week."

"I remember."

"You're still investigating his death?"

"There are some unanswered questions."

"I can't believe he'd commit suicide. It was so unlike him."

"When did you last see him?"

"The night before he died. He was in good spirits then."

Terrance Harker had appeared behind Leopold in his office doorway. "I'm waiting, Donna."

She treated Leopold to a final smile. "Goodbye, Captain."

That evening Leopold told Molly of his conversation with Terrance Harker. She sat at the dinner table, turning the stem of her wine glass as he spoke, and when he finished she said, "I always knew Terrance was a lowlife. Do you believe any of that?"

"You did imply to me that there were problems with their finances."

"There were, and there still are. I agree that any lengthy delay in the merger could unravel Harker Development, and possibly bring to light the source of their finances."

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"Do you still suspect it's an illegal source, with laundered money?"

"I purposely distanced myself from the answer to that question. After our conversation I took great pains not to learn anything that might compromise my ethical position. If Terrance thinks I've done anything unethical he's quite wrong. It sounds to me as if he was trying to use me to pressure you into dropping the investigation."

"I'm sure that's what he had in mind."

"Do you think he could have killed his brother?"

"He could have. Tell me something about their business dealings, about the people they're involved with. Do you know Donna Proctor, for instance? She's doing some public-relations work for them."

"I've heard them mention her, but we've never met."

"Tall gal, good looking."

Molly laughed, relaxing the tone of their conversation for a moment. "You've probably been casting glances at that cute secretary of Ralph's, too, haven't you?"

"Kelly O'Mera? What gives you that idea?"

"Her red hair."

Leopold chuckled. "Did I tell you I liked red-headed women?" He drank coffee and shifted back to a more serious mood. "Ralph's apparent suicide note was written to Kelly. That wasn't in the papers."

"I suppose that's not too unnatural, whatever their relationship. He was separated from his wife."

"He might have addressed it to his brother."

"His secretary would be the first one to find it on the computer. He might naturally have thought of her."

"Who else was he close to in his business?"

Molly finished her wine and thought about it. "There's a man named Drummond who came up frequently from New York to see the Harkers. He was handling the money from the other end, whatever the other end was. He had someone here in Monroe handling the shady aspects."

"Not you?"

"Not me. I made it very plain to Terrance and Ralph I'd have no hand in anything the least bit shady. I told them that the morning after our conversation. Ralph said not to worry, they had someone else who could handle any touchy parts. Maybe that's why Terrance is warning you of my involvement, to discredit any possible testimony of mine."

Leopold nodded. "What about this man Drummond? Where can I find him?"

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"Brian Drummond. Wait until tomorrow and he may come to you. He generally drove up from New York on Fridays to see the Harkers. I suspect he'll still come tomorrow to see Terrance."

The memorial service for Ralph Harker was held on Friday morning, and Leopold waited outside with Lieutenant Fletcher. Brian Drummond was in attendance, wearing a dark suit and a mournful expression. He was a man in his early thirties with a slight British accent. "I knew Ralph Harker very well indeed," he told Leopold after the service. "A shame to see him end up like this."

"A suicide?"

"That's what it was, wasn't it?"

"Surely you're aware of the newspaper reports hinting at something else. Could you tell me what your business relationship with the Harkers is?"

"Financial adviser."

"Will you be at the offices of Harker Development today?"

Brian Drummond nodded. "Terrance and I are meeting there after lunch."

"Fine. I'll see you then."

Leopold caught up with Terrance Harker as he was about to enter his car. His wife stood nearby, but Harker made no effort to introduce her. "What is it now?" he asked.

"With your permission, I'd like to conduct a little experiment this afternoon. You've heard about our possible witness to your brother's death. I'd like to have Lieutenant Fletcher at your office and have each of your employees step onto the terrace through Ralph's office door, for possible identification."

"Who is this supposed witness?"

"You'll know that in due time."

"What about me? Am I included in your lineup?"

"I'd like you to be, yes. Also Miss Proctor and Mr. Drummond, if you can arrange that."

"See here—!"

"It's a request, not an order. I think it might help us."

"Will your wife be included, too?"

"What?" Leopold asked.

"She was a business associate of my brother's. If everyone else is to be included, she should be."

Leopold felt his anger rising again. "I can arrange that."

He explained it to Molly over lunch. "All you have to do is walk

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out of Ralph's door as far as the railing and stand there for a few seconds. Fletcher will be right beside you and I'll be watching from across the way."

"Am I being accused of murder again?" she asked, reminding him of an incident before their marriage.

"Of course not. Terrance was trying to bluff me into forgetting the idea of a lineup of Harker employees. Now he has to go through with it."

"I'll do it," Molly said finally. "For you."

Leopold spent some time going over the plan with Fletcher and Connie Trent. They would both be at the Harker office, connected to Leopold by telephone. Leopold would be in Lem Maxwell's office, sitting at the side of their witness while the office personnel and the others came forward. It was scheduled for three o'clock, but Maxwell had an appointment and for a time Donna Proctor couldn't be found. She was the most reluctant to take part, but she finally agreed. At quarter to four they were ready to begin.

Connie picked up the phone in Ralph Harker's office when Leopold called. "All set there, Connie?"

"All set. Who do you want first?"

"The secretaries, I think. Mr. Maxwell doesn't think it was a woman, but we want to make sure."

Lem Maxwell sat at the window, staring intently at the terrace a block away. Leopold was beside him with a pair of binoculars. "Maybe I should look through those," the accountant suggested.

"No. I want it just the way it was on Tuesday."

The first girls appeared, walking to the railing and then retreating out of sight toward the glass door of Ralph Harker's office. Through the binoculars Leopold recognized the third one as Kelly O'Mera. "It wasn't a woman," Maxwell insisted. "Not unless she was wearing slacks and awfully high heels."

"All right." Fletcher was signaling from the terrace that the secretaries had all been out. Leopold picked up the receiver from the desk. "Connie, send out Terrance Harker next, and then the rest of the men who work in the office."

Lem Maxwell leaned forward a bit when Harker appeared but then shook his head. "No, I don't think so."

After the other men had come out to join Fletcher at the railing he said, "I just can't be sure. I only saw him for a few seconds."

"Connie, try Brian Drummond next."

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Maxwell shook his head again. "It might be, but I don't think so."

"Connie, who's left?"

"Donna Proctor and your wife."

"Donna next."

Lem Maxwell blinked his eyes. "She's tall, and that short hair gives her a masculine look at this distance. Maybe she was wearing slacks."

Leopold spoke into the phone. "Connie, are any of the women there wearing slacks that might fit Donna Proctor?"

"Just me, Captain, but I'm a couple of inches shorter than she is."

"Go into the ladies' room and change with her, just for a couple of minutes. It doesn't matter if they're short."

They waited five minutes before Connie returned to the phone. "She doesn't like this idea very much. She's talking about calling her lawyer."

"Let her if she wants to."

"No, it's okay. I finally persuaded her. Here she comes now."

Donna's head appeared and then the rest of her. Through the binoculars Leopold could see that Connie's slacks were too short, but otherwise they were a good fit. Maxwell needed only a few seconds to make up his mind. "No, she still looks like a woman. I don't think it could have been her."

Leopold sighed and picked up the telephone receiver once more. "Thanks, Connie. I guess that's all."

"What about Molly?"

"Oh, right. Have her come on out." He turned to Maxwell, feeling tension building unreasonably within him. "Just one more."

"No," Maxwell said at once. "Not her."

Leopold said over the phone, "That's all, Connie. Thank everyone for their cooperation."

"No luck?"

Leopold watched Fletcher walk toward the office door and disappear from view. "Unless—"

"What, Captain?"

An idea was beginning to form itself. "Connie, this is a long shot, but it might be worth trying. It's pretty late in the day now, but get the fingerprint crew up there in the morning and have them check that metal railing, especially the underside of the top strip. If the killer peered over after he pushed Harker, he just might have curled his fingers around that railing without even realizing it."

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"Everyone in the place probably has their prints on it," Connie pointed out.

"Try it anyway. I'll see you back at the squadroom."

He hung up and Maxwell said, "Sorry I'm not a better witness. Maybe I imagined the whole thing. Maybe no one pushed him."

"You didn't imagine it," Leopold assured him. "I've got a new angle I want to pursue. I'll get back to you."

Back at headquarters, Leopold huddled with Fletcher and Connie. He explained in detail what he wanted them to do, and saw at once that Connie seemed dubious. "Do you really think this will work?"

"It's the only chance we've got, Connie. Let's play it through and see what happens."

He arrived home for dinner, anxious to see Molly. He still didn't feel right about subjecting her to the humiliation of the lineup and he hoped she understood the spot he'd been in with Terrance Harker. The apartment was empty when he got there and he went about the task of preparing a simple dinner for the two of them. It wasn't until almost seven o'clock that he began to feel a bit uneasy. Molly always phoned if she was going to be this late.

Then he remembered their telephone answering-machine. He hated the thing himself, but Molly had insisted she needed it for business. Occasionally she'd left a message on it if she phoned before he got home. He switched it on now, noting that there was a message waiting, and heard her voice. "Hello, dear. Sorry I'm not there to greet you, but Terrance wants me at his office for a late meeting tonight. I'm grabbing a sandwich on the run and meeting him there. I'll be home as soon as I can."

Leopold flipped off the machine, stunned, then scooped up the telephone and dialed his office. "I need Fletcher!" he nearly shouted. "Or Connie Trent!"

"Both gone, Captain," the desk sergeant told him. "Anything I can do?"

"No." He hung up and ran for the door, pausing only to grab up his belt holster and pistol. The whole thing was coming apart and Molly could be trapped right in the middle of it.

He was back downtown in twelve minutes, parking across the street from the United Bank Building. Connie Trent was in the lobby, talking to the night security man. "Everything's under control, Captain. Fletcher's up on the thirtieth floor."

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"So is Molly!"

"Molly? What's she—?"

But Leopold was already in the elevator, pressing the button for the top floor. His panic was unreasonable, he kept telling himself, she'd only gone there for a meeting with Harker. "Stay down here, Connie," he told her tensely as the doors slid shut.

There was no sign of Fletcher on the thirtieth floor. Leopold entered the unlocked reception room of Harker Development and made his way along the darkened hallway to the light coming from Terrance Harker's office. He paused just before he reached the doorway to draw his revolver, then stepped inside.

Terrance Harker was seated behind the desk in his leather chair. There was blood on his temple as if from a blow, but he was alive. The sliding door to the terrace stood open.

"Molly?" Leopold called. "Are you out there?"

It was dark over the city now, but the western sky still held a tinge of blue. Enough for him to see the two figures standing by the railing.

"Go back," Molly warned. "He's got a gun."

"So have I," Leopold said, taking another step closer.

"I'll kill you, Leopold," the voice beside her threatened. "Stay right where you are!"

Suddenly the terrace was alive with light and Molly broke free. There were two shots close together and Leopold realized he hadn't fired at all. It was Fletcher, in the doorway of Ralph Harker's office, who'd turned on the lights and fired just as Molly's captor did, catching him in the arm and side.

"Good shooting, Fletcher," Leopold said. "Call an ambulance. Terrance Harker may need one, too."

"But who is he?" Molly asked, staring at the bleeding man on the ground. "I've never see him before. I found Terrance unconscious and this man jumped me."

"He's Ralph Harker's killer," Leopold explained. "And also our prime witness to the murder. His name is Lem Maxwell."

Connie Trent couldn't believe Maxwell had slipped into the building without her knowing it. "I was watching for him every minute, Captain, so I could warn Fletcher he was on the way up."

"He came in just before five and hid in a washroom," Leopold explained. "He's ready to sign a statement but I want his lawyer here first."

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They were at the hospital, where Harker had been treated and released and Maxwell was in fair condition following surgery to remove Fletcher's bullet. It was Molly's first opportunity to talk with Leopold and she wanted some answers. "What was he doing there, anyway? What was he after?"

"I'm afraid that was my fault," Leopold admitted. "I set a trap for him and it almost worked too well. In his presence, I asked Connie over the phone to have the fingerprint people check the terrace railings in the morning. I gambled that he wouldn't remember if he'd touched them or not and might try to wipe them clean. Of course, in getting to the terrace he ran into Terrance and had to knock him out. Maybe he planned to shove him over the railing, too. But then you arrived and things got complicated."

"How could he be the killer if he was your witness?"

"I suppose it was an attempt at the perfect alibi. He knew any number of people might have been looking out the windows of the Waterbury Tower and seen him push Ralph Harker to his death, so he decided on a long-distance alibi for himself by reporting to the police that he was one of the witnesses. As it turned out, he was the only one. We believed him, and never considered him a suspect for a single moment. How could he have been the killer if he was a city block away at the time?"

"Why would he kill Ralph?"

"He admitted he'd done some work for the Harkers once, and I think it was more than once. You told me when you refused to handle any unethical transfers of funds, they said there was someone else who could do it, someone Drummond was using. That someone was Maxwell, whose accounting business gave him the perfect cover for laundering funds. He went to Ralph's office on Tuesday, not intending to kill him, he claims. It was during the lunch hour and the substitute receptionist didn't notice him enter. Ralph accused him of trying to cheat them on the money transfers. They were on the terrace and started fighting. Maxwell pushed him over the railing. Terrance's office was empty, remember, and no one saw or heard a thing. He knew the name of Ralph's secretary, so he left a suicide note for her to find on the computer. Then he went out the back way to the men's room and down the fire stairs. That's where he hid tonight."

"How'd you know?" Connie Trent asked. "And if you knew, why did we go through that lineup today?"

"I didn't know, not when it started. But it occurred to me along

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the way that you couldn't see the door to Ralph's office from Maxwell's window—it was at too low an angle. Maxwell claimed he'd seen them come out Ralph's door. Since he also said he'd never been in Ralph's office himself, he couldn't be guessing. It was a lie. And if he lied about that, I decided he might be lying about everything. That's when I thought up the fingerprint idea to smoke him out. Employees could explain away their prints, but if his were found on that railing it would prove—at the very least—that he'd lied about never being there."

"You say he's ready to sign a statement?" Connie asked.

Leopold nodded. "I think he's trying to build a case for self-defense, but that'll be for a jury to decide. He admits pushing Harker and that's good enough for me."

It was good enough for Molly, too. On the way home she said, "To think that I got out of the public defender's office so our jobs wouldn't conflict! Did you really rush up there to save my life?"

"I did. I had this irrational fear that I might lose you."

She gave him a hug. "It's nice being married to a detective. Especially such a smart one."

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a *NEW* short story by

ROBERT BARNARD

"You know, you don't necessarily die at three score years and ten," Terry—the Little Terror—said.

"That's a comfort."

"My gran was seventy-four, and that's more, isn't it? My friend Wayne Catherick said she was past it."

"Well, it's nice to think I might stagger on a bit longer than seventy," said Albert, gathering together his things.

A rollicking story, every line a plum, by Robert Barnard, whose reputation here in America is beginning to equal that which he has enjoyed abroad for a good, well deserved while . . .

LITTLE TERROR

by ROBERT BARNARD

It was Albert Wimpole's first holiday on his own for—oh, he didn't know how long: since he was in his late 'teens, it must have been. Because after Mum died, Dad always liked to tag along with him, and though Dad was quite lively and certainly no trouble at all, still, it was not quite the same, because Albert was a considerate person, conscientious, and naturally he adapted a lot to Dad's ways.

Now Dad had decided, regretfully, that he couldn't quite manage it this year, his arthritis being what it was, so Albert was going to enjoy Portugal on his own. A small thrill of anticipation coursed through his slightly old-maidish veins. Who knew what adventures he might meet with? What encounters he might have? On the first day, though, he decided not to go down to the Carcavelos beach because the breeze was rather high. At the hotel pool it was nice and sheltered.

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"Hello."

The voice came from behind his ear. Albert's heart sank, but he was a courteous man and he turned round on his sun-bed in order to respond. He saw, without joy, a pink, ginger-haired boy, with evilly curious eyes.

"Hello," said Albert, and began to turn back.

"How old are you?"

"How old? Let me see now . . . I'm forty-two."

The carroty boy thought.

"That's not three score years and ten, is it?"

"No, it's not, I'm glad to say. In fact, it's not much more than halfway there."

"*I've* not even used up the ten," said the child.

"I can see that. You've got an awful lot left."

"Yes. Still, I wouldn't say you were *old* yet," said the boy.

"Thank you very much," said Albert and turned over thankfully as the boy left, but not before he had caught sight of the boy's parents, waving in his direction in a friendly fashion. They were heavy, unattractive people of about his own age or older. Perhaps the Menace was a late blessing, the result of some virulent fertility drug, and spoilt accordingly.

When Albert had been by the pool a couple of hours, he got ready to leave. No sense in overdoing the sunshine on the first day of your holiday. You pay for that if you do, Dad always said, and he was right. As he was just preparing to make his move, the ginger-haired head appeared once more close to his.

"What's your name?"

"My name's Wimpole. What's yours?"

"Terry."

"Ah—short for Terror, I suppose."

"No, it isn't, silly. It's short for Terence. Everybody knows that. And I think Wimpole is a jolly funny name. Do you know what happens to you when you die?"

The abrupt change in the topic caught Albert on the hop and he paused a moment before replying.

"That's something people have been discussing for quite a long time."

"No, it's not, stupid. You lie there still, and you don't breathe and you don't even twitch and you don't have dreams, because you're dead."

"I see. Yes, I did know that."

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"Then they put you in a box, and either they put you in the ground and throw earth all over you or they cre-mate you. That means they burn you up, like Guy Fawkes night."

"I must be getting along," said Albert, and indeed he did begin to feel a burning sensation on his shoulders.

"You know, you don't necessarily die at three score years and ten."

"That's a comfort."

"My gran was seventy-four, and that's more, isn't it? My friend Wayne Catherick said she was past it."

"Well, it's nice to think I might stagger on a bit longer than seventy," said Albert, who had gathered together his things and now began to make his way out.

"Terry's taken quite a fancy to you," said Little Terror's parents as he walked past them. Albert smiled politely.

The next morning Albert ventured on the beach. He walked half a mile towards the fortress, then laid out his towel and settled down. At first the breeze worried him a little because he knew people often sunburned badly in a breeze, but by half past ten it had died down and things had become quite idyllic.

"There's Wimpole!" came the well known voice. Against his wiser instincts, Albert looked up. Terry was standing over him and pointing as if he were some unusual sea creature.

"We won't intrude," said Terry's parents, settling themselves down two or three yards away and beginning to remove clothes from their remarkably ill-proportioned bodies. Terry, however, intruded.

While his parents just lay there tanning those fleshy bodies of theirs (Albert prided himself on keeping in good trim), Terry confined himself to questions like "What's that?" and to giving information about his friend Wayne Catherick. When his parents went down to dabble their toes in the freezing Atlantic, Terry's conversation reverted to the topics of yesterday.

"When you're cre-mated," he said, "they shoot your body into a great big oven. Then when you're all burnt up, they put the ashes into a bottle and you can put flowers in front of it if you want to."

"I think I'll be buried."

"Or they can scatter the ashes somewhere. Like into the sea, or over Scotland. Do you know what Wayne says, Wimpole?"

"No. What does Wayne say?"

"He says my gran's ashes ought to have been scattered over Tesco's Supermarket, because she ate so much."

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"That's a very nasty thing for Wayne to say."

"No, it's not. It's true, Wimpole. She was eating us out of house and home. Wayne says she took the food from out of our mouths. She just sat up there in her bedroom, eating. Sometimes I had to go up and get her tray, and she hadn't finished, and it was disgusting. She used to spray me with bits. I could have had chocolate cream sponge every day if she hadn't taken the food from out of my mouth."

"I don't think chocolate cream sponge every day would have been very good for you."

"Yes, it would. *And* I had to keep quiet *every* morning and *every* night because she was a*sleep.* It wasn't fair."

"You *have* made a hit," said Terry's mother, coming back. "It's nice for you, seeing as you're on your own, isn't it?"

The next day Albert waited in his room until he saw them trailing down to the beach. Then he made his way to the pool and gratefully sank down on a lilo. Though his sunbathing had been in shorter doses than he had intended, the red was beginning to turn to a respectable brown. Half an hour later Terry was sitting beside him, telling him about Wayne.

"It was awfully breezy on the beach," Terry's dad called out in a friendly way. "You were wise to come here."

"Wayne's dad has a sports shop," said Terry. "I got my costume there. Wayne's got an Auntie Margaret and two grannies. His grannies aren't dead!" he ended emphatically, as if he had scored a definite point there.

"That's nice," said Albert. "Grannies are always nice to little boys, aren't they?"

"Ha!" said Little Terror, latching back onto his grievance with the tenacity of a politician. "Mine wasn't, Wimpole. I had to be as quiet as quiet all the time. And her up there stuffing food into her mouth and dribbling and spitting out crumbs. I don't call that nice. It was disgusting. I was glad when she died and they put her in the oven."

"I'm sure that your mummy and daddy would be very upset if they heard you say that."

"That's why I don't say it when they're there," said Terry simply. "I expect they quite wanted her to live."

The next day Albert went to the beach at Estoril, then caught the bus to Sintra in the afternoon. When he got back to the hotel, the

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dinner hour was almost over and Terry and his parents were tucking into enormous slices of caramel cake.

"We missed you today," said Terry's mum reproachfully as he passed their table.

When Terry's parents got up to go, they came over and introduced themselves properly. They were the Mumfords, they said, and they had something to ask Albert.

"One doesn't like *putting* on people, but Terry's so fond of you and it is a *bit* difficult shopping with him tagging along, and we wondered if you *could* keep an eye on him one afternoon so we could go into Lisbon. After all, it's not much fun for a child watching his parents trying on shoes, is it?"

Albert thought the request an outrageous one. All his instincts cried out against agreeing. Why should he ruin a day of his holidays looking after someone else's repellent (and tedious) child? All his natural instincts told him to say no. All his middle-class instincts told him he had to say yes. He said yes.

"Let me see—I have places I'm planning to go to, and some friends I have to see," he improvised first, untruthfully.

"Oh—friends in Portugal," said Mrs. Mumford, in a tone of voice which seemed to be expressing either skepticism or disapproval.

"Shall we say Monday?"

Monday was five days away, and the Mumfords would obviously have preferred some earlier day, but *their* middle-class instincts forced them not to quibble but to accept and to thank him gratefully.

The next day was a day of rest for Albert: the Mumfords went on one of the tours—to Nazaré and Fatima. When he went past their table at dinnertime, Mrs. Mumford enthused to him about the shrine of Fatima. "It was a real religious experience," she said. "I expect Terry will want to tell you about it."

Albert repressed a shudder out of consideration for any Portuguese waiter who might be listening. He merely smiled and went on to his table.

The next day he took the train to Queluz, and the morning after he spent exploring the little back streets of Lisbon, then in the afternoon walking up the broad avenue to the park. But all the time Monday was approaching inexorably, and short of going down with beri-beri Albert could see no way of avoiding his stewardship of the repulsive and necrophilic Terry.

On Monday morning (it turned out, without explanation, to be a

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whole day's shopping Terry's parents were planning), after the Mumfords had trailed off towards the train for Lisbon, Albert took Terry into Carcavelos and filled him unimaginably full of ice cream. He hoped it would make him ill or sleepy, but it did neither.

When Albert suggested a very light lunch, Terry demanded roast pork at one of the town's little restaurants. Portions were substantial, and he ate with gusto. All this eating at least kept him quiet. Far from responding to suggestions that he have an afternoon's nap, Terry demanded to be taken to the hotel swimming pool. Terry's parents had impressed upon Albert most forcefully that Terry was not allowed to use the diving board, but while Albert was still fussing around removing his own clothes he saw that Terry was already up there and preparing to throw himself into the water.

"This is a suicide dive!" yelled the child. "I want to be cremated!"

"You've got to be drowned first," muttered Albert. Ten seconds later he was in the pool, fishing out the sobbing, gasping boy. Respect for the susceptibilities of parents prevented Albert giving him a good belting but he was able to pummel him pretty satisfyingly on the pretext of getting water out of his lungs. He commanded him to lie still for at least ten minutes.

"Would I be in heaven now if I had drowned, Wimpole?" Terry asked after five.

Albert did not think it wise to go into alternative destinations for his soul. His parents might be namby-pamby as theologians.

"I believe there is some period of waiting."

"Like on the platform, before the train comes in?" asked Terry. "I bet once I started I'd have gone fast. Like a space-shot. Whoosh! You wouldn't have been able to see me I'd have gone so fast."

"I expect you're right," said Albert, reading his P. D. James.

"I bet Grandma didn't go fast like that. I can't see it. She was enormous. Wayne's mum called her un-wiel—"

"Unwieldy."

"That's right. It means enormous. Colossal. Like a great, fat pig."

"You know your mother wouldn't like hearing you say that."

"She isn't," said Terry dismissively. "Anyway, you can't expect to go to heaven like a space-shot if you eat enough for three elephants. *And* if you're bad-tempered and make everyone's life a misery."

Terry lay quiet for a bit, watching other children in the pool, children with whom he habitually refused to play. Then, out of the corner of his eye, Albert was aware that he was being watched, slyly, out of the corner of Terry's eye.

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"My grandma died of an overdose," Terry said.

"An overdose of you?" asked Albert, though he knew it was useless to venture humor on this horrible child.

"No, stupid. An overdose of medicine. She had it in a glass by the side of her bed so she could take it while Mummy was out at work. Mummy does half days at the librerry. And Gran's medicine was left in the glass by her bed so she didn't have to get up and go to any trouble to get it. Fat old pig!"

"Terry—if I hear any more words like that about your gran I'm going to take you and lock you in your room. In fact, I don't wish to hear any more about your gran at all."

"All right," said Terry equably. "Only it's funny the medicine was in the cupboard, and she'd have to get up and get it to give herself an overdose, isn't it? 'Cause it was left by her bed like that every day."

"I expect she felt bad and thought she needed more," suggested Albert.

"Maybe," said Terry.

Then he took himself off once more to the pool and began showing off in front of the smaller children. Before very long he was on the diving board again and Albert was in the pool rescuing him. It was during the third time this happened that the Mumfords arrived back at the hotel.

"I do hope he hasn't been any trouble," said Mrs. Mumford. "Now say thank you to Mr. Wimpole, Terry."

For the remainder of the holiday, the sun shone with a terrible brightness. Albert grew inventive about where he spent his days. He took the bus and ferry out to Sesimbra. He found little beaches on the Estoril coast where fishermen still mended their nets and tourists were never seen. He took the train up to Coimbra, and only rejected Oporto because he calculated that he would only have two hours to spend there before he would have to travel back. He had none of the spicy or sad romantic adventures he had hoped for—what lonely, middle-aged person does on holiday unless he pays for them?—but he arrived back at the hotel for dinner tired and not dissatisfied with his days.

"My, you *have* got a lot of friends in Portugal," said the Mumfords, who were now spending all their days by the pool. "We've made good friends with Manuel, the waiter there," explained Dad Mumford. "He's introduced us to this lovely restaurant run by his uncle.

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They're wonderful to Terry there and they really do us proud at lunchtime."

So the Mumfords had found they could do without him.

Eventually it was time to go home. On the bus to the airport, Albert hung back and selected a seat well away from Terry. At the airport there was a slight delay while the plane was refueled and cleaned and restocked with plastic food. In any case, Albert knew that there he would not be able to escape the Mumfords entirely.

"Do you think you could just keep an eye on Terry for one *min*ute while we go to the Duty Free Shop?" his mum asked. There was something in the tone of voice as she asked it, as if she knew he had considered their earlier request an encroachment and she regretted having to ask again so obviously selfish a person.

"Of course," said Albert.

"I'll tell you how she died," said Terry, as their heavy footsteps faded away across the marble halls.

"I don't wish to know."

"Yes, you do. She was lying up there and Wayne and I were playing in my bedroom—*quiet*ly. How can you play quietly? And we were pretty fed up. And she called out, and called, and called. And when we went in, she said she'd got stuck on one side and couldn't get over and her leg had gone to sleep. She hadn't had her afternoon medicine yet. And while Wayne pretended to push her, I got the bottle from the cupboard and I emptied some of it into her glass, and then I put it back in the cupboard. Then I went and pushed with Wayne, and finally we got her over. She said she was ever so grateful. She said, 'Now I can go off.' We laughed and laughed when we got back to my room. She went off all right!"

"I'm not believing any of this, Terry."

"Believe it or not, I don't care," said Terry. "It's true. That's how the old pig died."

"It's an awful swindle in there," said the Mumfords, coming back from the Duty Free Shop. "Hardly any cheaper than in England. I shouldn't bother to go."

"I'll just take a look," said Albert, escaping.

Albert did not enjoy his flight home at all, though he bought no less than three of the little bottles of white wine they sell with the meal. He was examining the story and re-examining it with the brain of one who was accustomed to weighing up stories likely and unlikely (for Albert worked in a tax office). On the face of it, it was

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incredible that a small boy (or was it two small boys?) should kill someone in this simple, almost foolproof way. Yet there had been in the last few years murder cases—only now and again, yet often enough—involving children horribly young. And in England, too—not in America, where people like Albert imagined such things might be common occurrences.

Albert shook his head over the stewed fish that turned out to be braised chicken. How was he to tell? And if he said nothing, how terrible might be the consequences that might ensue! If adult murderers are inclined to kill a second time, how much more likely must a child be—one who has got away with it and rejoices in his cleverness. Even the boy's own parents would not be safe, in the unlikely event of their ever crossing his will. What sort of figure would Albert make if he went to the police *then* with his story?

Reluctantly, for he foresaw little but embarrassment and ridicule, Albert decided he would have to go to them and tell his tale. In his own mind, he couldn't tell whether Little Horror's story was true or not. It woud have to be left to trained minds to come to a conclusion.

At Gatwick, Albert was first out of the plane, through Passport Control and Customs in no time, and out to his car, which was miraculously unscathed by the attentions of vandals or thieves. As he drove off towards Hull and home, he suddenly realized, with a little moue of distaste, that his holiday had had its little spice of adventure after all.

"Well!" said Terry's dad, when the police had finally left. "We know who we have to thank for *that!*"

"There wasn't much point in keeping it secret, was there? He was the only one Terry talked to at all. And he seemed such a nice man!"

"I'm going to write him a stiff letter," fumed Terry's dad. "I know he works in the tax office in Hull. Interfering, troublemaking little twerp!"

"It could have been serious, you know. I hope you make him realize that. It could have been very embarrassing. If we hadn't been able to give him the names and addresses of *both* Terry's grannies . . . Oh, Good Lord! What *are* they going to say?"

"The police are going to be very tactful. The Inspector told me so at the door. I think they'll probably just make enquiries of neighbors. Or pretend to be council workers and get them talking. Just so's they make sure they are who we say they are."

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"*My* mother will find out," said Mrs. Mumford with conviction and foreboding. "She's got a nose! . . . And how am I going to explain it to her? I'll never forgive that Wimpole!"

Later that night, as they were undressing for bed, Terry's mum, who had been thinking, said to Terry's dad:

"Walter: you don't think we ought to have told them about Wayne Catherick's gran, do you?"

"What about her?"

"Old Mrs. Corfitt, who lived next door. Should we have told them that she died of an overdose?"

"No. 'Course not. What's it to do with Terry? They said the old lady got confused and gave herself an extra lot."

"I suppose it would just have caused more trouble," agreed Mrs. Mumford. "And as you say, it was nothing to do with Terry, was it?"

She turned out the light.

"Well," she said as she prepared for sleep, "I hope next time we go on holiday Terry finds someone nicer than *that* to make friends with!"

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a *NEW* Hollywood adman story by

RON GOULART

"Murder is, after all, the most awful act a human being can commit," Jane A. Wicker was saying to the handsome, sunbrown interviewer who shared a fat candystripe sofa with her on the screen of every single operating set in the television store.

"I can tell you an equally awful act," Red Stebbins told the television sets. "The one you're putting on right now . . ."

HAVE YOU HUGGED YOUR UNDERTAKER TODAY?

by RON GOULART

He managed to do everything he'd boasted he was going to do and more. His investigative work led to the solution of the old murder case that had baffled the Los Angeles area police for over fifteen years, he figured out the real motive for what had been thought of as a bizarre series of random slayings, and he contributed to the capture of the killer at long last. This final accomplishment Red Stebbins never knew about, though, because that unexpected razor got him just before it happened.

Although I had no way of anticipating it, I contributed to Red's death. He himself was, I'm nearly certain, planning to commit a murder of his own, and my wife says that if I wasn't so negative I'd see that what I actually did was help save a life. I'm nowhere near as easygoing and positive as she is and I seem to be having a fairly rough time handling the guilt, but even though at the time I unwittingly set him up, I believed I was doing him a good turn.

When I encountered Red Stebbins two weeks ago in Westwood,

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I had no premonition of what lay ahead. The late-morning air was relatively clear as I went strolling back to where I'd parked my car. I'd been talking with one of our advertising-agency clients in his office in the village. What I was trying to do was convince him that calling his contemplated frozen product Italian Gangster Pizza was not anywhere near being a terrific idea. He in turn informed me that he wasn't sure he ought to remain with an agency that had no sense of humor.

As I passed the high, wide front window of Chez Télé a fist commenced tapping on the other side of the thick glass. Slowing, I glanced into the store.

The first thing I saw was Jane A. Wicker—nearly forty Jane A. Wickers, since an image of her was on every single operating television set in the store. She was smiling, running one slender hand through her long auburn hair, and looking, though a shade gaunt, quite attractive.

Then I noticed Red. He was wearing a suit the color of burnt marshmallows and making a come-on-in motion with his left hand. His thick splatter of freckles stood out on his pale puffy face, his crinkly red hair was standing up high and disordered.

After glancing at my watch, I nodded and went on into the Chez Télé.

"Good to see you after all these—"

"Listen to what this pinwheel is babbling about," he invited, pointing at Jane on several of the screens.

"Murder is, after all, the most awful act a human being can commit," she was saying to the handsome, sunbrown interviewer who shared a fat candystripe sofa with her.

"I can tell you an equally awful act," said Red. "The one you're putting on right now."

"—anxious to hear about the new bestseller you have in the works that brings you to Southern California," Prentiss C. Gunch was telling her.

"He seems more anxious to peek down her front," observed Red, starting to pace along the tiers of sets.

"The most brutal and bizarre series of killings in recent Los Angeles history will be the topic of the book I'm working on now."

"You're referring to the infamous Demon Barber of Hollywood case, aren't you, Jane? Those crazed slashings that took place fifteen years ago and—"

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"I'd prefer not to apply that crude media tag to the killer." Jane's smile had tightened.

"You bet you don't," Red told the array of redheads. "Because my forthcoming book, the definitive one on the whole damn case, is going to be called *The Demon Barber of Hollywood.*"

"—be calling my book *The Man with The Razor.*"

Following in Red's wake, I inquired, "Are you and Jane in the midst of another feud?"

He stopped to stare up at the largest screen. "I'm enthusiastically ignoring her," he replied. "Even though she swiped my book idea and is trying to compete with—"

"You two were close a few years ago. Why don't you see if—"

"Close? I guess you could say we were close, since we were shacked up in that townhouse in Manhattan. Rented, I might add, with my royalties from *The Mind of a Serial Killer.* Eighty-six weeks on *The New York Times* list of—"

"I thought Jane wrote that one."

"Don't go turning into a goon on me," Red warned, starting to pace again while he watched Jane talking. "After cuckolding me, making off with six cardboard cartons of my latest true-crime research material, *and* failing to kick in on the Christmas presents for the doorman, the elevator man, and the super, Jane A. Wicker swiped my brilliant notion and penned a cheap quickie imitation entitled *The Mind of a Mass Murderer.* A cheesy knockoff that—whoa now."

On the sets Jane was saying, "You're confusing my earlier book with a cheesy knockoff written by a man who calls himself Red Stebbins." She laughed in a pitying way. "Can anyone who writes serious books call himself Red? I mean to say, we don't speak of Red Shakespeare, Red Hemingway, Red Ellison—"

"Listen, Princess Bimbo," Red told a row of screens, "*I'm* going to write the best book on those razor killings. And even though you managed to get a contract for your chintzy imitation of my opus, it'll be *my* book that gets all the sales. All the book clubs, all the miniseries and movie action, all the merchandising cumshaw that—"

"Um," said a sweet-faced old lady who'd eased over to us.

"Button your yap, granny. I'm drinking in every word this pinwheel is spouting, storing it up to rerun and savor whilst plotting revenge and other—"

"Be that as it may, son, you can't go monopolizing all the sets this way. I'm shopping for a small portable for my granddaughter and

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I want to see what my favorite game show *It's a Steal!* looks like on some of—"

"Your granddaughter must be a goon if she watches that tripe."

"Pay attention, young man. *It's a Steal!* is *my* favorite game show."

"Then it's you who's a goon, granny."

"See here, I'll call over that broad-shouldered young salesperson yonder and have him give you the heave-ho unless you—"

"Red." I clutched his arm. "Let's get going. I'll buy you a cup of coffee."

His eyes remained on the dozens of screens, on the glowing image of Jane touting herself and the upcoming book that was apparently going to be in direct competition with the one he was at work on. "If you weren't stuffed to the gills with caffeine, you wouldn't look as though you just stepped out of your coffin," he told me. "If there's anyplace in this pesthole where they serve peppermint tea, I'll tag along."

"Why, they serve a most refreshing peppermint tea right across the street at the Feast of Reason," the old woman pointed out. "Why don't you two scoot over there?"

"It'll probably be jammed to the rafters with goons and pinwheels, but okay." Red glared at several of the Janes, gave them a fingertip-kissing salute, and allowed me to drag him away.

Before Red got into the fist fight with the proprietor of the Feast of Reason, which was a combination natural-foods cafe and bookshop, he explained more details about his latest book project.

"Now, isn't that better than coffee?" he asked, reaching across our narrow table to tap my cup.

"Nope."

"Sure, it is. Don't be a goon. And rose-hip tea is great for your—"

"How'd you and Jane come to pick the same topic?"

He took another enthusiastic bite of his soy-jelly donut. "Strange coincidence, what?" He took another chomp. "Odd how, after spending two-plus blinking years under the same roof with me, overpriced roof at that, the lovely, winsome Jane A. Wicker just happened to come up with an idea for a true-crimer that I'd been kicking around for eons. Could it be, do you suppose, that she might've seen the bulging folder packed with copious notes that I'd made on the Demon Barber of Hollywood case?"

"Did she?" I ignored my herb tea.

Red was glancing up at the bookshelves nearest our table. "That

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peabrain never had an original idea in her entire thirty-three years on this planet. The only smart thing she ever did was move in with me, and look how she eventually fouled that up."

"I don't recall the case that clearly. What was—"

"You should get your snoot out of *Advertising Age* more often," he advised. "Fifteen years ago, just about this same time of year, there were five bloody murders here in your own beloved, smog-ridden L.A. The crackpot killer, dubbed by the media the Demon Barber of Hollywood because he sliced up his victims with an old-fashioned straight razor, slaughtered those five over a nine-day period, then he went out of business and was never heard of from that day to this."

"Wasn't there some demonic angle?"

Nodding, Red said, "The Demon Barber was fond of scrawling little catch phrases like *I do Master Satan's work* in blood on the walls. He also—well, he did certain things to the bodies. See my forthcoming blockbuster for details."

"As I recall, the victims were from all across this area," I said. "None of them linked in any way."

"The killer apparently picked 'em at random—a foreign-car mechanic in Santa Monica, a widow in Glendale, a lady realtor in Pasadena, and so on."

I watched him for a few seconds. "You're onto something."

He strived to appear guileless. "At this point, all I have is a vague hunch. I only arrived in this posh cesspool day before yesterday. When I really start digging, interviewing the surviving kin and ferreting out facts everybody's overlooked up to now, the true story will emerge at long last."

"Jane's been out here a couple weeks, hasn't she? I know I've been seeing her on talk shows and other local—"

"Let me but allude to the old fable of the turtle and the bunny."

"You have a contract for your book, don't you?"

"Did I ever write on spec?" He'd reached the natural blueberry center of his donut. "Opportunist Press advanced me—well, a handsome six-figure advance. Okay, okay, I admit that Princess Bimbo managed to scrounge a hundred thousand more out of Peterkin & Sons. You have to remember, though, that I don't perform lewd acts with my publishers, editors, or—"

"Is there room for two books on this particular case?"

"At the top there's only room for one good one." He tapped his chest with his thumb. "That'll be mine. What's ticking me off is the

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possibility, remote though it may be, that Jane'll wheedle herself a movie deal on her book and beat me to all that show-biz gravy. Right now Amalgam Studios is enthusiastic about what they've seen of my book in progress, but I don't trust—"

"I know Win Ferber over at Amalgam. He's the head of—"

"Don't you think I know who runs Amalgam? I may look like a rube from beyond the Rockies, but I'm aware that Ferber owns the whole shebang." He gestured with the remains of his donut. "Now there's the kind of relationship I should've had with a woman. His wife, heiress to an automotive fortune, bought him the whole Amalgam setup some years back. Very neat."

"I'm meeting with Win Ferber and several other Amalgam people early next week," I said. "They're producing a new TV sitcom we're sponsoring part of. Show's called *Isn't It a Drag?* About three GIs in 1944 who end up having to impersonate the Andrews Sisters in Occupied Europe while—"

"Spare me the sparkling details."

"The pilot tested very high."

"Around here it would. Half the goons in L.A. are transvestites or—unk!" He'd noticed a specific book on the shelf. Rising from his chair, he grabbed it. "Do I see any of *my* books on these groaning shelves? No, nay, not at all. But here sits *The Texas Oil Millions Murder Case* by sweet little Princess Bimbo. A hamhanded steal of my *Oil and Blood.*" He scowled as he scanned the jacket copy. " 'Crime-of-the-Month Club selection, alternate selection of the Talk-a-Book Society, soon to be a major motion picture.' Yeah, well, that movie deal fell through but not soon enough to keep it from futzing up my chances for a miniseries on my book."

"Um, sir." The tanned, handsome, and wide proprietor had come over to our table. "The books aren't for reading at the tables. Customers often make that mistake."

"Who would *read* this compendium of pinwheel swill? Only some goon whose lips move whilst he peruses, who has to run a stubby, grease-stained finger over the—"

"Speaking of which, sir, you seem to have smeared natural blueberry jelly all over the dustjacket."

"It's an improvement."

"Usually in situations like this we ask the customer to purchase the book in question at full price," explained the muscular owner of the Feast of Reason, "but since Miss Wicker's brilliant and in-

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sightful book is over a year old, and hasn't been on the bestseller list for a few months, we'll let you have it for just $19.95 plus—"

"You can have it on the cabeza, pinwheel!" Red swung out with the fat book and bonked the bigger man on the forehead.

The fight only lasted another two minutes or so. Afterward, I picked Red up and helped him totter outside.

"That's one more bit of grief that woman's caused me." He paused to rest against the rear end of a parked Porsche.

"Maybe you ought to quit seeing everything as a contest and—"

"Ah, how apt." He was leaning down, squinting at a bumper sticker on the car. HAVE YOU HUGGED YOUR UNDERTAKER TODAY? "Yessir, very apt for dear Jane. She's going to need a friendly undertaker if she doesn't quit trying to sabotage me."

The next day my agency sent me to Akron, Ohio. We'd been test-marketing a new ice-cream bar called Igloo Stix for one of our clients and the live polar bear who was taking part in promotions at malls and supermarkets had escaped. My job was to supervise the hunt for him, see that the police didn't shoot him and he didn't do anything that would jeopardize the image of the new product. I was also supposed to write some lighthearted newspaper ads about our missing bear, something that would keep local citizens from worrying about being mauled, maimed, or eaten by the Igloo Stix mascot. I wasted nearly two full days tracking what turned out to be a dancing grizzly who'd, coincidentally, run away from a traveling circus. Our bear showed up on my fifth day in Akron, sleeping peacefully in the back of a van at a used-car lot. Sales at Igloo Stix actually went up almost 20% during the week he was on the loose.

I arrived back in Los Angeles the eve of my meeting with Win Ferber and the other Amalgam Studios execs. Late that night Red phoned me.

"Wake you up?"

I was in my study pasting tearsheets of my polar-bear ads in a scrapbook. "Not at all. If you want to do that, call again in two hours."

"Sounds like you're developing a rudimentary sense of humor," he said. "Listen, I've been overcoming monumental barriers since you left for your frolic in Ohio."

"You having trouble with your Demon Barber book?"

"Dear little Janie has bribed just about every damn surviving relative of the five victims," he told me, anger strong in his voice.

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"Not a one of those goons'll so much as spit in my eye. Me, the dean of American true-crime writers."

"I won't mention that to Win Ferber tomorrow."

Red said, "Here's what you *can* insinuate into the chat. Despite all the nasty tricks Princess Bimbo has been playing me in her vicious attempt to sabotage my career, I'm forging ahead. I'm going to win this sweepstakes. How? I shall have not only the most detailed and spine-chilling account of the murders ever written, I'm going to have the solution to the case."

"You know who the killer is?"

"I'm close to knowing," he answered. "Because I have spotted what nobody else did—not cop, not reporter, certainly not plain Jane. I have seen what they all failed to see. And that, old buddy, is the link between the victims."

"What do you mean? Those killings were just a madman striking at random in—"

"Not at all. All the theories that've been floating about for fifteen years are completely cockeyed."

"So what's the real motive for—"

"The actual motive I haven't unearthed as yet, but I'm close," Red said. "When you're gabbing with Ferber and the other Amalgam goons, all you have to do is tell 'em that Red Stebbins will reveal the identity of the killer in his book on the Demon Barber of Hollywood case and offer absolute proof of his guilt."

"You ought not to promise more than you can deliv—"

"Quit talking like a pinwheel. Before I'm through, I'll have all that."

"But what exactly do you have now?"

He hesitated. "Don't tell anybody this part," he cautioned. "But I was going through the L.A. *Times* morgue on this case and I came across some photos of one of the victims that I'd never seen before—taken while the poor simp was alive. It took me a while, but I remembered where I'd seen him before. His name was Rollo Kneep and he worked in the mailroom at *TV Week* magazine. He was twenty-six, living in Pasadena, when he got killed. I'd met him when I was out here in the late Sixties doing a mag piece on nostalgia. There was a big old-movie fan convention in Pasadena and Kneep was one of the organizers. I even interviewed him."

"And he told you something that you now realize gives you a clue to—"

"I can't remember a flapping word the goon told me. But I had a

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hunch and I dug around in the newspapers for the week the killings began," continued Red, excited now. "Okay, two days before the first Demon Barber murder they held the Third Annual Greater Los Angeles Movie Buff Convention at the Seawitch Hotel in Santa Monica. Rollo Kneep was once again an organizer and in a newspaper shot of a bunch of the fans I'm near certain I spotted none other than Carmelita Novsam."

"Another of the victims?"

"Yep. Realtor in Pasadena, age thirty-five."

"So two of them were interested in old movies."

"Yeah, but suppose they all were? Suppose those five were all at that con?"

"And?"

"All sorts of possibilities. The most obvious one is that they saw or heard something they weren't supposed to."

"The Demon Barber killed them all to keep them quiet and then made it look like the work of a madman? He'd have to have a damn strong reason to make him kill five innocent people."

"That's what crime is all about. You do it for fun and profit."

"Can you tie the other three in, or come up with a reason why—"

"Not yet, but I will," Red assured me. "If I could get those dimwitted relatives to break the code of silence Jane's imposed, I'd find out quick."

"Otherwise?"

"It'll take a bit longer," he said with confidence. "I'm a crackerjack investigative reporter and that means that if one avenue is blocked, I know how to detour to get to where I want."

"So you want me to hint to Ferber that—"

"He may not be bright enough for a hint, tell him right out. Inform him that Red Stebbins knows what the link between the victims was and that these weren't motiveless crimes—details to follow once Amalgam options *my* book and not Princess Bimbo's."

"When exactly will you have the actual—"

"Faith, old buddy, is what you got to have. Faith. Don't be a goon."

Vowing not to be a goon, I hung up.

Win Ferber was impressed when I mentioned what Red was promising. So were his five associates, none of whom was taller than or as suntanned as the fifty-one-year-old head of Amalgam Studios. Ferber indicated that if Red could really deliver what he promised, the studio would be inclined to option his version of the case and

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not Jane's. We didn't talk much more about the Demon Barber of Hollywood because the director and the story editor of *Isn't It a Drag?* got into an argument as to which of the Andrews Sisters was a blonde. The director swore it was Maxine and the story editor claimed it was Patty. Ferber told them that as far as the show was concerned, it was LaVerne. That caused the story editor to start shouting and then jump up on top of the conference table. What with one thing and another I didn't get home until sundown.

I was going to phone Red at his motel in Malibu, but when I played my answering-machine tapes I found a message from him.

"I'll call you mañana, old buddy," he said. "Jane thought she had me trapped, but, as I told her, it takes more than a brain the size of a watermelon-flavored jelly bean to outfox Red Stebbins. I'll be doing research all night and, comes the dawn, I ought to have most of the answers. Let's have lunch sometime."

I never saw Red again or spoke to him. What follows is my account of what I'm pretty certain happened, based on newspaper stories, one brief conversation with Jane A. Wicker, and some speculation.

That afternoon while I was at Amalgam, Red had decided to talk directly to Jane. He wasn't going to give away anything about the theory he had but simply ask her to let him talk to a few of the victims' relatives she'd signed up as exclusive contributors to her book. Red figured he ought to be able to find out from them if the remaining three victims had been at that movie convention. Once he established that, he'd zero in on the events that took place at the Seawitch Hotel that weekend. With a little luck and his proven skill as a detective, he ought to be able to come up with a motive and, more than likely, the identity of the elusive killer.

"Hi, Jane, this is Red," he began.

"Oh, God." She sounded as though he'd just informed her she had a terminal illness.

"Look, it doesn't bother me that we're friendly rivals, hon," he said amiably. "After all, we're all members of the same profession."

"Bug spray."

"Is that some new teen slang you're trying out on—"

"I was wishing aloud there was a bug spray powerful enough to get rid of pests your size," she said. "Red, dear heart, don't ever call me again or come near me. It's bad enough knowing you're on the same coast." She hung up on him.

His orange hair stood up straight, crackling. "Boy, where's the

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Demon Barber when you need him?" He slammed down the phone. "Have I got a candidate for— Hey!"

Suppose, just suppose, Jane was found dead. Suppose her throat had been cut with a straight razor. Think of the damn publicity. The whole country would be talking about the Demon Barber again. And Red, tearful over the loss of his dear friend and colleague, would come forward and vow to track down the killer. Besides the publicity for him, there'd only be *one* book about the old murders.

The Demon Barber, fearful that such an ace investigative reporter as Jane A. Wicker would expose him at long last, would have looked her up, stalked her, and got rid of her to protect his dark secret. Terrific story it'd make. Especially with Red all over the media vowing that he wouldn't be scared off, that his book would be completed.

Okay, where would he strike? Someplace remote, quiet, out of the way.

Wait a minute. Galen Warlocksky, one of the victims, had run a garage in Santa Monica. Sure, Red had been by there just yesterday. The place was in a rundown section of town, hadn't been open for years. All he had to do was lure Jane there, use the razor, and that was it. No more competition, no more having her tell him he was an insect. And all the perks from the Demon Barber book would be nice, too.

How to get her there, though?

Ah, simple.

Red waited an hour and phoned Jane again.

"If this is you, Red, I swear I'll—"

"Miss Wicker? Miss Jane A. Wicker?" He was, he knew, great at doing fake voices and this was one of the best. He sounded deathly calm, a bit crazed, and not at all like himself.

"Yes?"

"I'm a great admirer of yours."

"Well, I suppose that's fine, but I really don't have time for every pest who—"

"But you're writing a book about me."

"What?"

That got her. You could sense it in her voice.

"Of course I can't reveal my identity, but I would like to talk to you," he continued in his convincing madman voice. "You're not like that hack Red Stebbins. You're a real artist and I trust you to present my side of the story fairly."

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"Sure. Where can I—"

"Tonight. Ten o'clock. At Warlocksky's old garage. Out back and alone."

"Yes, but—"

He broke the connection. Chuckled. Waved his arms and clicked his heels.

Earlier that same afternoon Red had succeeded in tracking down the group that had staged the Third Annual Greater Los Angeles Movie Buff Convention. He found out that all the records of the convention, as well as those for six others, were stored in a rundown warehouse down in Manhattan Beach.

What he'd do tonight is get the warehouse keys and drive there about seven. When he was certain it was safe, and after he'd dug around in the files for a bit, he'd sneak out and get over to the garage in Santa Monica. He'd have bought a straight razor at a pawn shop by then, disguised of course. He'd be waiting for Jane when she showed up at ten. Once rid of her, he'd hurry back to the warehouse and go on with his researches. Not a perfect alibi, but a hard one to crack.

Besides, the police were sure to think it was the Demon Barber come back to discourage Jane from pursuing the case.

Red got into the warehouse all right. It smelled as though rats and mice had been holding their conventions there. Using a flashlight, since all the power was off in the hollow old brick building, he located the cardboard cartons for the year he wanted. In less than fifteen minutes he'd found the membership roster for the convention.

"Holy moley!" Red exclaimed after scanning the rows of names. "I was absolutely right! All five of the victims were at—"

He died right then.

The Demon Barber had followed him from his motel, and after waiting around to make sure Red was alone he slipped inside the dark warehouse. He was still pretty good with a razor.

Just as Red's body hit the grey-cement floor, Jane burst into the place. She had her .32 revolver in one hand and a powerful flashlight in the other. "Freeze!" she said authoritatively.

Win Ferber turned slowly to face her. "Maybe we can make a deal, Miss Wicker. Amalgam'll buy your book and you—"

"Are you kidding?" She tossed her auburn hair and laughed. "I've just caught the Demon Barber. I don't have to deal with a dinky studio like yours now . . ."

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Although he never lived to get all the details, Red's basic hunches about the case were all correct. Ferber had been at the Seawitch Hotel on the first afternoon of that movie-fan convention—not as a buff, but to visit a striking young lady he was trying to end his relationship with. In a few days, his wife, a jealous woman some years his senior, was going to sign the final papers that would make him owner of Amalgam Studios. If anyone found out about his affair and told her, the deal would be spoiled for good and all.

The young lady was angry that afternoon and she chased him from her room into the hotel corridor, sparsely dressed and shouting angry remarks at him. By chance, one of the hotel elevators—it had been acting up for several days—let five movie fans off on the wrong floor. They all witnessed the scene between Ferber and his mistress.

Fortunately for him, they all wore name tags. By carefully sneaking around the convention he was able to find out who they were and where each one lived. He became the Demon Barber, took care of anyone who could foul up the studio deal, and then stopped killing.

My mention of what Red was onto unsettled Ferber. He hung around Red's motel that night and then followed him to the warehouse. And Red's call to Jane, which hadn't fooled her after the first minute or so, caused her to suspect that he was investigating something important and wanted her out of the way for a while. She drove over to his motel and followed him when he left.

She's never suspected that he was planning to do away with her. And so far she hasn't gotten around to wondering why he had an old straight razor in his coat pocket. In fact, she told me she thinks it would be a nice touch if she dedicates her book to Red's memory.

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the first Chester Long short story by

CARLETON CARPENTER

Another story set in Hollywood, this one by actor-playwright Carleton Carpenter. Mr. Carpenter's hairdresser detective, Chester Long, starred in two novels, Only Her Hairdresser Knew *and* Deadhead. *This is his Hollywood debut in a selected short . . .*

THE BUM WRAP

by CARLETON CARPENTER

"No, no, dear boy! Not a R-A-P party. I should imagine that would entail a select group of Hollywood wags lounging about an overheated pool, sipping strawberry daiquiries and dishing the latest industry dirt. No, my dear Chester, it's *wrap* with a 'w'—as when an assistant director, with all the pomposity and ill-achieved authority invested in him, calls, upon completion of the final setup for a film, 'That's a wrap.' "

Coolidge Thorpe sipped daintily at his strawberry daiquiri and stirred a slight ripple into the calm of the clear pool with a bare toe—a former dancer's point with the instep gracefully arcing the toes almost back to the heel. His steel-grey bootcamp crewcut belied his somewhat effete mannerisms, still-youthful physique, and uncertain but certainly well advanced years.

Someone once confided to me—overloudly over lunch—that his mother, with whom he shared this sprawling pink-stucco *palais*, was actually his sister. Calling her Mum made him seem younger as he would navigate her, slightly alist and always awash with her ever-present ballast of double bourbons, from the A group to the A-plus group at his frequent parties.

In former days, under long-term studio contract, he had become *the* father figure—practically the American symbol of fertility—and

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was cast in film after successful film as head of families numbering anywhere from five to a full dozen. Thorpe himself, however, remained a confirmed, devout bachelor.

"Naturally you'll be there. Five P.M. Stage twenty-one. Tomorrow." An edict. Imperiously delivered through thin lips beneath an improbable turned-up nose. A nose to which all odors were obviously semi-suspect.

"Wouldn't miss it," I said, taking another pull at my Amstel light beer. "My regulars will expect a full report when I get back home to my shop next week."

Home is New York City and the shop is Chet's Barber Shop on Eleventh Street in the Village, just off Sixth. It had been more or less innovative, I guess, when I opened for business a few years back. Haircutting for men and women in the same place. Old hat now. There are unisex salons all over the place. Maybe the only unique thing left is that it's really a barber shop—no fancy gimmicks and no fancy prices. I cut hair. And think of myself as an old-fashioned barber. Too much Petersburg, New York—the tiny upstate hamlet I hail from—rubbed off on me to comfortably wear the title Chester Long, Stylist.

How and why I found myself here in Hollywood, being vastly overpaid on this megabucks movie to do hair, is another story. Too long, too convoluted, and has nothing to do with the price of tomatoes.

Maybe I'll tell about that another time.

Anyway, I'm here, winding up my "stint on the flick"—perhaps three months in Always-Always Land has been too long, the local lingo is beginning to creep in—and looking forward to the wrap party tomorrow. With a 'w.'

Parties, I've learned, are the true and foremost Los Angeles product. In the Hollywood horserace, films place a distant second. Parties pop up at the drop of an option. Any excuse will do. "I got the part! Let's party!" "I turned down the part! Let's party!" (No one loses a job or gets fired in Hollywood. One rejects offers and asks to be released from contracts.) "I found the most divine shoulder bag on Rodeo! Let's party!" "It's my Afghan's birthday tomorrow! Let's party!" "I was mugged last night by the hunkiest stuntman! Isn't my shiner gorgeous? Let's party!" And most of the parties seem to be costume affairs. The rent-all establishments, more numerous than banks in L.A., thrive . . .

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I was off in a dark corner of Stage twenty-one when the magical long-awaited words broke the silence. "That's a wrap! Let's party!"

The film we'd just finished was an epic—what isn't now?—called *Spartacus III*. I don't remember a II, but no matter. Naturally this called for another costume party. I'd expected total Roman regalia, but discovered otherwise. Tired of togas and other trappings the cast had traipsed around in the last three months, most opted for other party garb. Many of the bit players, however—the beautiful studs and studettes—chose to remain in their scanty wardrobe, which had been carefully designed to display as many muscles and mammillae as good tastelessness allowed. All that bronzing body makeup shouldn't be a total loss.

I watched from my corner as the cameras and cables and lights were hauled away and the set, a Roman public bathhouse, was transformed from reel to real. If you didn't look up toward the catwalks and overhead-light rails, you'd forget you were on a soundstage. The set, incredible in its detailed design, transported you back into ancient raunchy Rome—you could almost smell an oncoming orgy. You could, for real, smell the mountains of delicious food that had been catered and set up as quickly as the camera equipment disappeared.

Already dozens of mini-togaed extras were milling around the groaning tables, looking less like atmosphere than actual publicans, crying out the occasional "Evoe!"

Gradually, the leading players and stars, carefully timing entrances, began to arrive. I knew some slightly more than others, none really well. Hairdressers are only necessary props for most of them. Only Coolidge Thorpe had offered more than token friendship. His initial interest, I suspected, was quasi-amatory, but once he realized my striped barber's pole twirled to a straighter tune we settled into a chummy, comfortable relationship. I liked him. He was an outrageous fraud and poseur but he was a splendid actor and great fun to be around. He took to me, he said, because I was a true New Yorker like himself. Actually, he was from Indiana, I think. However, he'd worked for years on Broadway in a series of smart revues and musicals, and earned his stardom.

Coming West, and going Hollywood at once, he pretended to hate all the glitz while thoroughly embracing it. He would proclaim loudly to everyone within earshot around and in his olympic-sized pool how phony they all were. True actors remained in the East, he'd say. He was here only because Cora, his mum, adored all this

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tommyrot. Of course, movie money was a pleasant, if insufficient, buffer against all the Hollywood horse manure.

He wouldn't have given it up for the world. Even after the jobs became infrequent and the roles cameo, he hung in there. But pink stucco! Well, at least several thoughtful trees hid his home from Sunset Boulevard. A complete anachronism, Coolidge. This film offered him a meaty role, though not really a comeback, I suppose. More like a last hurrah.

I watched his entrance into the party. White-silk toga (from a Senate scene), flowing phony white beard, bald-cap wig with white fringe, bare-footed and carrying a large scythe. Father Time.

"Stand aside, plebeians! Aside! My tool is lethal," he cried, stroking the twisted handle of the farm implement on his shoulder. Everyone laughed and gave him a wide berth.

By his stately side was young Tony Greeva, one of the new-breed Hollywood brat pack, hunky, horny, and clad only in a designer diaper. His hair was a moptop of sun-bleached yellow curls and he looked as if he'd just stepped out of a Calvin Klein underwear ad. Happy Baby New Year! The applause at their arrival was tremendous.

Greeva's leading lady, Mae Beth Jolson, was dressed in a polka-dotted Shirley Temple thing, ruffled and starched. Hemline way up on the long legs revealing matching polka-dot panties underneath. She, too, sported a mop of blonde curls. Leading lady? She looked more like a leading baby. But I must confess most of the cast seemed practically prepubescent to me. Maybe it's because the big four-o is catching up with me next birthday that I feel ancient. And the fact that everyone out here in California is absolutely beautiful, youthful, and unflawed is a mite depressing. It makes me really miss New York. I long to see a couple of good sallow faces and a blemish or two. And an out-of-condition body. I have the sneaky feeling I'm the only person in all of L.A. with a flat chest. Flat, hell—concave.

None of that at this *Spartacus III* shindig. Even Ethel Teasdale, the spindly character actress who played Thorpe's bitch of a wife and seemed frail enough to tip over if anyone blew a puff of cigarette smoke toward her, held her own in the chest department. Coolidge and Ethel had been paired up often in the past, their mutual loathing increasing with each outing. He claimed she was a bitch off screen as well as on. She claimed the same about him.

I agree with Thorpe. None of the three wigs I did for her, including the curly blonde one she now wore, met with her approval, and her

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fussing and complaining had been nonstop. However, Jerry Grandig, the young director of the epic, had approved all three and Teasdale was stuck with them. And me. Coolidge chortled with glee one evening when I confided that she was nearly bald. "I knew it!" he had shrieked. "Bliss!"

Grandig, a moody youth, kept mostly to himself during the shooting. From what I saw on the set, he said as little as possible to the actors and seemed to really communicate only with Luke Lassiter, his young cinematographer. Grandig sported a moustache, intense eyes, and skin that, although clear, was untanned. A point in his favor. I'm sure he didn't know me by name. I don't believe he ever looked directly at me during pre-production or the entire shooting. I don't think he ever looked at anyone. His vision seemed centered on some deep inner space far beyond mere mortals.

But not tonight. Although he wasn't wearing a costume—his ever-present cardigan sweater and baggy corduroys are a costume unto themselves—he was being affable. Grinning, backslapping, eyes bright and glistening—mixing and mingling. A whole new persona. All hyped up. Or maybe hopped up. Drugs tended to be pervasive at these parties.

Coolidge once told me over too many drinks, "All of Hollywood is a frigging pharmacy! At a recent party someone asked me if I'd like to do a couple of lines. Flattered, I smiled and recited a favorite bit of Ariel from *The Tempest*. Everyone gave me the oddest stares. Some s.o.b. sniggered, 'He meant coke, you old ham!' My dear, I didn't know where to look I was so embarrassed. My ego and the generation gap joining hands to annihilate me. I wrapped my dignity around me like a feather boa and fled. Not a bad exit. Tallulah would have been green."

I edged into the throng, feeling a bit like an intruder, and managed to gather up a plate, rye bread, lox, cream cheese, a ladle of fresh fruit, and a beer.

I smiled and nodded to one and all as I munched and sipped, juggling plate, bottle, and plastic utensils. No one paid me much attention. The film was finished. I was already a ghost. Disposable goods. Like plastic knives and forks.

I hate parties where I can't sit down, so I avoid most cocktail affairs. Won't even stay in a bar if there's no empty stool. I'm too tall to hover. But here I was, hovering, unnoticed, my stabs at party conversation falling on deaf, perfectly formed ears and my jolly party smile meeting with vacant stares from flawless faces.

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I grabbed another beer, deposited my plate, and looked around for Coolidge Thorpe. I knew I could at least make positive contact with him. We could carp together about the caterers, who'd combined fine chinaware with the plastic utensils. But I couldn't find him. He'd vanished into the noisy, self-involved mass of merrymakers.

The music, blasting from overeager speakers, was too loud, too one-note rock, and way too much for me. Way too much to hear someone calling my name. Someone remembering it? No way, José.

I was wrong.

"Chester Long! Chester! Mr. Long!"

I looked around.

"Down here, my darling!"

I looked down into the upturned, actually smiling face of Ethel Teasdale. Had she actually said "darling"?

"Don't stand there like a praying mantis, dear. Get a full beer and let me lead you to a quieter place where we can get off our feet!"

"Miss Teasdale?" I nearly stammered in surprise.

"*Ethel,* my darling. Come along."

My bottle was half full but I reached for another as ordered and carried both as I followed the frail character actress through the maze of dancing, intertwining bodies.

Reaching the outer rim of the main mass of writhing whatevers, she waved her hand at a young couple sitting on a stone bench and coupling at the lips. "Shoo!" she said. "Go cross-pollinate with that nice twosome over there!" She pointed a lacquer-tipped finger and they shooed. Languidly.

We sat. Thankfully.

"Ta for the beer," she said, grabbing the full one. I hadn't realized it was meant for her. She tipped back her curl-topped head and tossed off a man-sized belt. I suddenly realized my jaw was agape. I snapped it shut, hoping she hadn't noticed.

She didn't burp, thank God. Just giggled. "Can't a lady enjoy a beer, my dear?" So she hadn't missed my gape. But she missed the reason for it. It wasn't the beer, it was her whole demeanor. What had happened to her bitchiness? Something else was odd about her. For a moment I couldn't put my finger on it, then it hit me. She'd changed wigs since her arrival. The new curlytop was pinkish instead of blonde.

She looked at me levelly—eye to eye. Another first.

"You were very buddy-buddy with old Coolidge during the shoot-

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ing, weren't you, Chet?" Chet? I must not have hidden my surprise. "That's what they call you, isn't it?"

I nodded.

"Well, weren't you?"

"Yes," I said, pupil to teacher. "I like him."

"He's an old fraud. Always was." A small smile crept around the almost cupid's-bow lips.

"I know." I smiled. "So does he. It's one of the things I enjoy about him." She reached over and actually patted my knee. Well, the white-duck trouser covering it. That's about as far as my costume went. White ducks, saddle shoes, and blazer.

"I'll tell you a secret," she said, winking. "Me, too. Although God forbid anyone in the industry finds out. Our bitching at each other all these years is the biggest fraud of all." One final squeeze of my knee and her hand withdrew. "Good for business. Which, as you can guess, hasn't been all that terrific lately for Thorpe and me. Our ongoing feud helps. It keeps our fading names bantered about and if a role comes along for me, the producer or casting agent automatically thinks of Thorpe to play opposite, and vice versa. Typecasting is a fact of life out here and might as well be encouraged."

"You could have fooled me," I said.

"Could have?" she shot back.

"Did! Did! I thought you hated each other's guts!"

She beamed and gulped down several ounces of beer, like a thirsty lumberjack at Miller Time. "Although we've probably only been fooling ourselves these last few years. It's no doubt a secret the entire industry is in on now, how famously we *really* get along. How we really *like* each other."

As I started to say I hadn't heard any such rumors, a studio guard approached our bench. "You both better come with me," he said in a shaken voice. "Mr. Thorpe has had a terrible accident."

The eeriest thing about the next few moments was the sudden lack of blaring music. And the spaced-out murmur of the crowd—like a giant, simmering teakettle. The Roman orgy had turned Speilberg-spooky.

The L.A.P.D. arrived quickly with ambulance, doctors, photographers, M.E. staff, the works, but they were all too late to help poor Coolidge. He had been found behind one of the portable dressing rooms lined up at the far end of the huge soundstage lying face up,

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toga bloody where the sharp point of his scythe stuck out from a lethal wound, midchest.

The plainclothes cop who seemed to be in charge formulated a bizarre explanation: Thorpe, tired of lugging it around, had dropped his Father Time prop on the floor, blade pointing up, somehow stumbled and fell on it, and then rolled over on his back. The force of his fall would have been great enough for the thin curving blade to penetrate his body. A tragic, clumsy accident.

It sounded like far-fetched hogwash to me.

Accident or not, police had been posted at both exit doors leading from the studio, perhaps until a witness who had seen or heard something (over that ear-splitting din?) came forward to help clarify things. All sorts of rumors and theories began to circulate. Actors acting. Bit players with a chance to take stage.

"Maybe he committed suicide, throwing himself on the blade like a samurai!" "Why was he carrying that real thing instead of a mock-up?" "Thorpe was always a stickler for realism, if you'll excuse my choice of words." "It's to the point. Oops! Sorry!" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. A man was dead, for God's sake! No one seemed to care. They joked and laughed. No one was letting the tragedy affect the party spirit. And no one was suggesting that it might be something other than an accident. Not even the police. They seemed almost as casual about the dead actor as the cast and crew.

Coolidge was quickly covered and carried from the soundstage. Wrapped. Like the film.

Was I the only one there thinking murder? The non-performer being melodramatic while all the theatrical types were underplaying? I couldn't bring myself to think so. Coolidge, jesting when he first arrived at the party, had been right to call the scythe a lethal weapon. When I was a kid back in Petersburg, one of my uncles nearly amputated his left leg with one.

Shortly after the body had been removed, a young policeman found the bloody, wadded-up rag. It had been shoved behind the trailer-hitch support for one of the dressing rooms. Only it wasn't a wadded-up rag. It was a wadded-up wig. Blood-soaked and curly blonde.

The tight group huddled near me by the portable dressing room went into sudden shock. Ethel Teasdale, Jerry Grandig, Luke Lassiter, the cameraman, a couple of others, and Mae Beth Jolson. Mae Beth went into hysterics, crying uncontrollably, pulling frantically

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at her short brunette hair with nervous fingers. Shirley Temple had lost her blonde moptop.

Ethel Teasdale was twisting and readjusting her pinkish one. I wondered about her sudden affection for me earlier. And for poor Coolidge. A personality change with a wig change? One thing was fairly evident. I wasn't the only one thinking murder now.

The dressing-room door flew open. "What's all the commotion, chums?" Tony Greeva, diaper slightly askew, hung onto the door frame. He was obviously stoned. Higher than just cocaine. Heroin, too, maybe. And booze. His diction was lazy and slurred, his beach-yellowed curls mussed.

"Oh, Tony!" Mae Beth sobbed.

"Mae Beth Jolson, how could you!" The cold, austere tone had returned to Ethel's voice, her accusation clear and courtroom-loud.

I had examined, without touching it, the bloodied wig. It was not the blonde one I'd styled for Teasdale. It was close, but Ethel's was made from human hair. This was not. It was the one Mae Beth had been wearing when she arrived at the party.

"Oh, God! Oh, God!" she kept saying. "That nice old man."

"Nice try," Ethel told her, "but it won't work—that was *your* wig."

"I know," Mae Beth said. "But Tony wanted to wear it. He bet no one would notice he was wearing a wig, so I let him put it on." She started crying again. "And he was right—no one could tell it wasn't his own hair."

The detective asked politely, "What are you on, son?"

Tony giggled, then turned sincere-serious. "I did a little coke is all, officer."

"Did you kill Mr. Thorpe?" the detective asked.

"Kill? Are you kidding? Do I look like a killer? I couldn't get cast as a killer if I auditioned with a smoking gun in my hand." He laughed boyishly. "A little accident there with old Thorpie, that's all. A little accident with that nice old man. That nice dirty old man." He giggled again. "Tried to clean him up a little. I mean, clean it up a lit— Sorry about ruining your wig, baby. It got itself all messy."

One of the medical examiner's staff helped Greeva to the couch inside the trailer and checked him over. There were no needle marks on his tanned arms or down-covered legs, but high up in the groin area, hidden beneath the diaper, were fresh tracks. The aide reported to the detective, who nodded. "Perversely, it will probably help his

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defense. The kid was probably too far out of it to know what was going on."

Suddenly, deep in my gut, I knew Tony Greeva was going to get away with Coolidge Thorpe's murder. And no one would ever know for sure exactly what had happened. He was young hot box-office, bankable, a studio saver with millions riding on his future. The industry needed him. And the L.A.P.D. needed the industry. It would end up being a bum rap that would never stick to the brat-star.

Greeva appeared again at the doorway, his smile lopsided. "Send in a female nurse to check me out next time, okay?" He clapped his hands together. "So are we going to party or not? Let's moooove, ole buddies! I'm bored hanging around here! Let's all *go* somewhere!"

The detective offered a helping hand. "Yes, son, let's go."

"Primo! Primo!" Baby New Year cried. "I'm tired of just hanging out here. Just killing time."

Right, I thought. Father Time.

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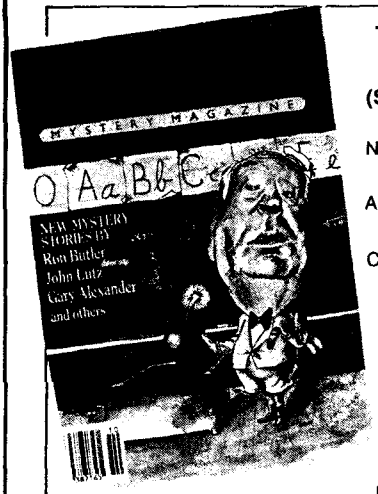

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HELEN EUSTIS

In Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers, *Joanne Harack Hayne writes: "A writer who has attracted considerable critical acclaim as the result of a single work, Helen Eustis owes her permanent place in the history of detective fiction to her first novel, the Edgar Award-winning* The Horizontal Man." *(In May 1985, editor Joan Kahn won the second Ellery Queen Award from the Mystery Writers of America. Joan began at Harper & Row in the 1940s as a reader for then editor Edward Aswell. After reporting negatively on so many manuscripts that she began to wonder if she was in the wrong job, she read one she recommended highly for publication—*The Horizontal Man*—thus launching her own great career as well as that of Ms. Eustis.) "A Winter's Tale," from the author's 1949 collection* The Captains and the Kings Depart and Other Stories, *has the same "psychoanalytic sensibility" Ms. Hayne describes as at the heart of* The Horizontal Man . . .

A WINTER'S TALE

by HELEN EUSTIS

The cold sea wind whipped down the street, banged the shutters, made the whole house creak like a ship in a storm, but she was snug inside, with a coal fire in the Franklin stove, and a cup of coffee laced with brandy standing by her typewriter. Maurice the cat was sleeping on the seat of the wing chair and, while she was glad of his company, she was delighted that it was all she had. She put in a solid morning and half an afternoon at her work, neatly carpentering her research, sandpapering the joints between this bit of information

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and that: she surveyed her pile of typed pages with satisfaction and thought she would add to it before the day officially ended in darkness. So she was irritated when she saw the stocky but irrepressibly boyish figure of Porfirio Marco limping up her walk.

"That bore!" she exclaimed ungraciously, and Maurice opened two green slits to glance at her. She registered—automatically, for why should she care?—that her last coat of lipstick was recent and still good, and that her hair was neat enough, although she found a pencil stabbed through the red-gold knot when her eyes met her reflection in the mantle mirror. She would have pretended to be out, except that she had set up her typing table in the window; already Porfirio had seen her there and raised his hand in salute. Halfheartedly, she raised hers in return and went to open the door.

He came up the steps all windblown and smiling. He made his little ceremony of changing his cane from the right hand to the left and shaking hands.

"Well, come in before we both freeze to death," she said, and he came inside, laughing heartily at nothing.

She took his pea-jacket from him and hung it in the hall, while he went in by the fire. He laid his cane down and stood rubbing his hands. She was a tall woman with (as she had had occasion to discover) a prepossessing air of assurance; she made a point of looking down at him as she asked him what he would drink. Then she felt ashamed of herself—he was guilty of nothing but the interruption of a solitary afternoon, and hadn't she enough of them? But he smiled back up at her confidently and said he would have whatever she was having. For if she felt her height, he was as sure of his beauty—he was handsome with a perfect Latin regularity, dark and heavy-browed, with black curls hanging on his wide forehead like grapes. As she poured a cup of coffee for him in the kitchen, she reflected that she had always mistrusted handsome men and that she personally disliked this one for his oily pleasantness. Then she scolded herself for sulking, told herself she really knew nothing about him, and came back to the living room managing a smile.

It all turned out quite otherwise from what she had anticipated. She liked Porfirio Marco that afternoon. She had met him several times before, at such parties as the half deserted town afforded, and had not liked him at all. He had impressed her as ornate and in bad taste, like the interior decoration of a Latin hotel, or European men's tailoring. Alone, he was quite different—not fawning, not falsely ingratiating, but tougher, less grammatical, less polite, more honest.

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He talked about his work this afternoon, about painting, with honesty and humility and real love. She could never help liking a person who liked and respected his own work, whatever it was. She felt sorry for this apparently genuinely simple young man, who, she considered, had been made into something of a monkey by the arty crowd which had taken him up.

Also, he said a number of things about himself which seemed to her true, and wise. About what his painting meant to him, and how he had come to do it after he was wounded.

"I was always the bad boy. I was always the one who picks the fight in the bar. There was a chip on my shoulder that fell off if you sneezed." He laughed, and smiled at her as if to show that the chip was altogether gone. "Look at those," he said and held up his big square fists in the firelight. "All my life I did hard work. I was so strong I never had to think. When I had something to settle, I fought. After I got hurt, I felt terrible. Now I am less than half a man, now I can no longer fight. The boys who used to hate me, now they pity me, and I lie in bed and cry because I can't beat them up for their pity. Finally, I get better, and they show me how to paint. Then it all comes streaming out. It isn't ever the world you fight. Always, always, it's yourself. You can't fight that with your fists. But in some way I can't explain, it starts to work itself out when you start to paint."

She nodded, listening to him. It seemed true; it was the way she had found it, too. It was pleasant to sit in the firelight listening to him talk. He told stories well. He was much more of a person than she had imagined. She didn't know how many of his insights had come to him by way of psychiatrists in the hospital where he had been so long, but he seemed to have made them his own. Yes, she liked him that afternoon, she was glad he had come. She enjoyed the hot coffee, the warm fire, while the wind howled outside—and his voice talked on and on.

When, as the darkness was falling, he came over and sat at the footstool by her, laid his big sailor's hands on her knees, looked at her out of his dark, long-lashed, unfocussed eyes, and said, "Ruth, you are very beautiful, like a big orange butterfly breathing in the firelight. May I kiss you?" she only lay back in the wing chair with the cat on her lap, closed her eyes, and laughed, saying, "Go on home, you great baby! You've had too much to drink, and you underestimate me if you think I'm down to cradle-snatching. Go on home to your wife."

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He got up slowly and painfully, catching at the arm of her chair to support himself, and something in the movement made her stop laughing. A queer revulsion came over her. Ordinarily, she thought, when one sees a strong person who is hurt, one's heart goes out to him even more than to a weak one, but there was something in the way that Porfirio behaved toward his affliction that did not make her feel in the least maternal or pitying toward him. He seemed to be exhibiting his lameness, somehow, as a beggar will exhibit the stump of a limb, for profit. Yet this comparison confused her, too, for it was hardly the beggar's fault that he— She left the room abruptly, leaving him fumbling for his cane, when the natural thing would have been to hand it to him. She got his pea-jacket down from the hall rack to hurry him on his way.

He took it from her and threw it on, then he stood and put his hand on her shoulder. "It's been good talk," he said, looking straight into her eyes. "May I come again?"

She stepped back, letting his hand fall. She had altogether lost her feeling of liking him. He had stayed too long. "Do," she said without warmth. "Bring your wife, won't you? I'd like to meet her."

The weather stayed stormy; it snowed in small flurries, the wind howled, and she was very much alone. She worked. She went to the grocery. There were one or two people whom she saw, but she did not really know them. The main fact of her life was that she was lonely, and she nursed her loneliness like a sore tooth when the dentist is out of town. Nothing to do about it. Her loneliness ached and throbbed through her whole being, yet there was something good about it, because she had chosen it. It was not a lie. She had made her decision, broken her ties, and come to this deserted summer resort because she had been tired of all the lies of which her life in the city had been made—the central lie of a love affair, the smaller lies of friendships, acquaintances.

The move had frightened her, had seemed a desperate choice, yet now she wondered if perhaps she was not made to be lonely. In her twenties, she had often felt bitter that fate had not sent her the husband, the suburban home, the children that she saw by the alumnae bulletin had been awarded to her college classmates, but had dealt her only affairs and periods of belonging to no one. Now, in her thirties, she was beginning to think that she had never wanted to belong to anyone, that she wanted to belong only to herself, and that at long last she very nearly did. So she held her course straight

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into the wind of loneliness. The world she had left came to tease and tempt her only once, in the form of a letter from her amputated lover. The sight of the envelope, the postmark, the handwriting set up in her nerves a familiar set of panics and vibrations. But when she slit it open and began to read, she was safe once more. When would she come to her senses? He missed her desperately, he could not live without her! Did she think it had been his fault? How could anything change until his wife— That was enough. She knew all about his wife, and about him, too. What she had seen at last was that he was a person who gambled only for small stakes. It was not for *him* she was lonely. For his arms and his lips and his warmth at night, maybe, but not for *him*. She had had enough.

After the first visit of Porfirio Marco, she could have sworn that he was about to become a pest, of the kind who drops in at odd hours until one is finally obliged to be rude to him, but it was three weeks before she saw him turning in her walk again, so of course she liked him better for that. Just as she preferred cats to dogs, so she preferred people who knew how to leave her alone. She was almost glad to see him when she opened the door; they greeted each other like old friends. He stamped off the snow and came in by the fire while she, without asking what he wanted, went and mixed highballs.

Porfirio talked well again that day. This time he told about his family—a familiar story about a devout weeping mother, a brutal father, and himself, the black sheep among five other hard-working brothers. He had run away to the merchant marine, while they worked on the father's fishing boat. He had got into trouble and been sent to reform school. He had gone back to sea, and then the war came. He talked about painting, too. He was working at a still life, which he found difficult and dull after the seascapes on which he had made his little name.

"Then why try?" she asked carelessly. He made her feel old and bored when he began to talk about his indecisions, seeming to seek her guidance for them. Hadn't she her own?

But the notion that one might simply and frankly refuse what seemed alien had evidently not struck him before. He appeared delighted with the idea and slapped his knee with his horny palm several times in excitement, asking many questions. "You mean—"

"Who can you be sure of pleasing, ever, but yourself?" she said lazily. "If you can't please yourself, how can you hope to please anyone? Will you have another drink?"

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"No," he said. "I mean yes," and followed her into the kitchen, forgetting his cane in his excitement.

"You mean," he said, standing with one hand on the sink, his head cocked, following her movements like a child, "you don't mean one *should* be selfish? I am always fighting selfishness—always. I am the most selfish person I know, Ruth. It works in me like sin and I don't know how to stop it."

She did not want to instruct. She did not want to reassure or give good advice. She wanted to be amused. Yet this was a favorite theory of hers and she could not leave it unsaid. She said that she thought that selfishness, carried to its ultimate and purely logical conclusion, was the only hope of the world. That the only hope of selflessness, if by that one meant consciousness of membership with other selves, was through self-knowledge and self-love. She said it badly, and too quickly, and she felt cross at him, as if that were his fault. She felt a fool for having given so much of herself to him. He was a sentimental person, she was a rational one. Her ideas could only seem wicked in the context of his mind. Her only concept of sin was a certain kind of dishonesty to oneself, and she was not even sure of that; to him, sin meant certain very definite bad things one did.

They went back to the fire. She curled up on the couch, he sat on the hassock by the Franklin stove, nursing his drink between his knees, frowning a bit, his curls falling over his forehead. Watching him, seeing him handsome, massive, quiet, concentrated, and inward-turning, Ruth felt a little tremor flare up in her like one of the jets of flame that leapt up from the coals, and she took a quick swallow of her drink, as if to put it out.

"I like to be alone," he said at last, in a troubled voice. "I like so much to be alone."

She cast down her eyes and stared at her hands. She said that this seemed natural to her—that from her observation, creative people needed more solitude than others.

He shook his head. "She does not understand," he said, and Ruth knew at once that he meant his wife, and knew also that this was the conversational reef that she had feared all along. She had no intention of hearing his complaints against his wife. "She thinks I am taking something from her when I want to be alone."

Ruth said, formally and coldly, that she believed this to be a problem which all married people had to work out.

But at this he seemed to reverse his direction entirely, as if it had been she who had attacked his wife. "Marjorie is a dear person!" he

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protested. "She is so sweet, so mothering—you don't know! Like the mother bird who goes naked, who pulls out all her feathers to warm the nest."

She was torn between laughing in his face and losing her patience. She compromised by saying flatly that that was nice and looking at her wristwatch.

"She came to me when I was ill," he said, his large eyes seeming to water as he looked pleadingly at Ruth. "She took me in and fed me—in all ways she fed me!"

How angry he made her when he spoiled it—it did seem he always had to spoil it! They would be getting along so well, with a decent, equal kind of comradeship, a community of interests, when all at once he would inject this false, syrupy, tasteless note. What was all this chatter about his wife, and why should she be expected to listen to it? She said rudely, "If your wife is expecting you home to supper you'd better go. It's quite late."

He sighed, looked at her, fumbled for his cane, and rose. She got up, too, to go with him to the hall. He took her by the arms, then, and tried to kiss her. She just managed to wriggle clear in time. "Look," she said in the same voice she would have used to a bad-mannered child or dog, "don't make passes at me. I'm not interested. Go home."

Regretfully, but apparently without embarrassment, he let her go. "Ruth," he said, "don't be angry. Always be my friend. I can talk to you. I never had a friend I could talk to like you. Don't be angry. Will you promise to be my friend?"

She backed away from him, still irritated, but also touched, to her own surprise. When he rang the note of honesty, he rang it so clear and firm that you forgot all the rest. He seemed as sweet and pure as a child, then, with his strength, his naïveté, and the curiously twined accidents of his art and his lameness. "I like you too, Porfirio," she said—she could say no less. "I like having you come and talk to me. But if you can't resist practicing up on your romance when you come here, stay away. I'm bored with that. I'm bored with wandering husbands. I like people who play for keeps or not at all." Why had she said that? That was a little too much.

"All right," he said, like a scolded child. "All right, Ruth. I won't bother you any more. Just don't ask me to stay away. Just let me come to see you sometimes."

Now again the note was false and overdone, and this time she

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laughed out loud at him. "Don't take yourself so seriously!" she said, and opened the door for him. "Good night!"

This time after he had left her, she did him an honor she had not meant to accord—she thought about him. She wondered why it was that his attentions did not give her any feminine lift, any sense of her own power or attractiveness as a woman. After all, she was not immune to flattery; he was not unattractive. He was quite attractive. In fact, there had been that moment when he—enough of that. He was younger than she, but that was not necessarily a drawback. Why was it then, that when he made advances, tried to kiss her, it gave her a sense of having been insulted in some subtle way? She went into the kitchen to fry sausages, scramble eggs, and fix herself a tray, thinking about the problem and about Porfirio Marco meanwhile.

Sitting in front of the fire with the tray on her knees, drinking cold beer and eating slowly, she believed she finally had it. It was that nothing he said, no approach he made, had anything to do with herself, Ruth Radway. The moment that glazed look came into his eyes—ridiculously reminiscent of a dozen movie actors, yet genuinely his own—her identity seemed to disappear for him and she felt herself being turned into a machine, useful for one purpose only, personally unimportant. How she hated that! It negated the whole function of love—that marvelous expansion of one's own awareness, one's own particular powers— Love? Where did the question of love come in?

She turned from this aspect of Porfirio Marco, having settled it to her own satisfaction, to consider him in another way, as a kind of human object, thus rendering him as impersonal, in a different sense, as he had made her. Many little pieces of him fitted into a pattern which she made out, and the key piece, as she saw it, was the fact of his having served a term in a reform school. He was a type she recognized easily from her reading—the delinquent boy. Born into a poor family which had come to America from another, an older world, there was no authority he had not scorned—school, church, father, and mother. They had all told him lies, and he had known it. That he could be President, would go to hell, would be rewarded by God if obedient. What had been real to him had been that wild competitive boy's world in which he vied with his contemporaries for the role of Worst, the way to Best having long since been closed to him by circumstances beyond his control. His un-

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pleasant ingratiations, the kind of obsequiousness to which she so objected—weren't they the delinquent boy's classic attempts to butter up authority? He had none of that sturdy open rebellion that grows in the child who has known love. Always the alibi, the surreptitious misdemeanor, the easy dishonest repentance.

What was harder to fit in, of course, was the thing that had been grafted onto this groundwork by the accidents of war, his wound, his lameness, his painting, his little fame among the artists of this summer colony which had even spread as far as New York and Boston. How far and in what direction could a young man of twenty to twenty-five be changed? But on the whole she was pleased with her definition of Porfirio Marco. It placed him, at least in part. It even put him in his place.

After that, there was another hiatus between his visits. She did not even glimpse him in the streets of the town, as she often had before, though twice she saw his wife in the grocery, a small girlish woman with short flying hair and a pinched face, so hunched and anxious in her aspect that Ruth could not forbear to imagine in her the congenital victim of cruelty. They had never been introduced but they knew each other by sight, and each knew that the other knew her. They smiled small smiles when they passed, and Ruth felt vaguely guilty. But she did not give either Porfirio or his wife much thought. She was working hard on her book, which was not her book at all but a piece of hack work for the advertising agency for which she worked. She liked it all the same. She finished a first draft and sent it to her boss. He liked it, too, as she had known he would. She began revising in accordance with his suggestions. She could be out of here by spring if all went well. If she wanted to be. Why was it one always thought that things would be different in the spring?

And then one day he came charging up her walk again, limping, but as if he had forgotten that he limped, his head lowered, his shoulders driving forward, his whole body expressing some kind of disturbance and urgency. He did not even glance at the window but came straight to her door and pounded on it. When she opened it to him, he did not come in but stood on the step and commanded, "Come for a walk with me," throwing his head back in a funny little movement as if he wished to indicate something behind him that he wanted to show her. He seemed so bullish, so male in his imperi-

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ousness and distress that in complement she felt momentarily fluttery and vague toward him.

"Oh," she said distractedly, "oh, all right. Wait a minute while I get my coat." She liked the feeling of being mastered in this unimportant, not dangerous matter. Yes, she would go with him, meek and feminine in outward submission, but seeing it all inside herself, secretly amused.

She wrapped a woollen scarf around her head, put on heavy mittens and fleece-lined boots besides her fur coat. It was very cold, but very clear. The weathered shingles of the closed cottages shone pure silver; the sea was smoky winter blue; the tide was far out on the pale sand; the sky seemed terribly high. He began to walk away from the town and toward the deserted point of land where in summer the cars and bathers would have swarmed. She walked a little behind him with small steps, like an Oriental wife, overplaying the part he had assigned to her, inwardly pleased and laughing at it.

And pleased with him, too, though less than usual laughing at him, because whatever his trouble was it seemed real; whatever he was feeling he was really feeling; his slickness and phony good manners were altogether gone for the moment. He said nothing, but rocked doggedly forward, not favoring his bad leg, at such a rate that she was hard put to keep up with him. When they reached the point, he crossed the sand and began to clamber out on the stones of the breakwater. She took hold of his arm and said, "Let's not go there, it's terribly slippery," but he would not be stopped.

"I know a place," he said, and presently brought her to a crevice by a big boulder where they could crouch and be sheltered and feel the sun. He sat down and thrust out his bad leg; she curled up a little apart from him and managed, in spite of her mittens, to light a cigarette. All this time, nothing had been said. Now he burst forth, "I went to Boston to the hospital for a checkup and I got drunk."

She wanted to laugh, but managed not to, for he did not look as if he would have taken it lightly. "You did?"

"For three days I lay filthy drunk in the apartment of a whore!" he proclaimed, his eyes rolling.

"Well," she remarked—what could she say?—"every boy has to sow his wild oats."

"Now," he said, and paused dramatically, "now I come back, beaten and bruised, like a dog from a fight, and we quarrel. She wants to know where I've been. Oh, all right, I don't blame her, I don't mind that! But then she says to me that she isn't satisfied with our mar-

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riage, that I must find work. That she is tired of supporting the house. That she wants a baby!" A look of sheer disgust came on his face. "I came back from that degradedness and dirt with such a painting in me that I must make, Ruth, and this is what she says to me! An ultimatum!"

Oh, dear, she groaned to herself, now I must talk to him like a dutch uncle. She had not been in a mood for hearty reproofs. On the contrary. She said, "Don't you want a baby?"

"Oh," he said, "someday. Later. Sure. But now—now I'm just getting started! I can't carry that load now, Ruth—a wife and a kid around my neck! My God, Ruth, the way it is now she makes a little money in the store and I sell a picture once in a while, and I'm satisfied! I've got all I want—a roof over my head, I'm warm, I've got enough to eat. And I can paint! What more do I want? But she—she'd like a house with an electric icebox and a car and—" He broke off in disgust.

"Do you want to be married?" she asked him. It had seemed a simple question which got at the root of the matter, but when she saw the change in his expression, she knew it was a great deal more explosive to him. His face drew together almost as if he would cry. He bent his head and said, so that she could barely hear him, "I don't know. I just don't know. At first it was fine. I needed her. She was so good to me. Now—I'm so sorry for her. She wouldn't know what to do."

"Don't you have any respect for her?"

He looked blank. "How do you mean?"

"Don't you think she could take care of herself? She's earning her own keep now, so you can't be worried about that. Do you think she's such a mess she'd never get another man? After all, she got you. Or was that just on her nursing ability? You have a cruel kind of pity, Porfirio. Maybe I think all pity is cruel. I don't know."

His mouth dropped a little open and he stared at her and shook his head. "No, no," he said. "You don't understand. She loves me so. She couldn't stand it."

The stage had now been reached, as it had been in every conversation they had ever had together, at which she had begun to hate him, hate him for his vanity and his lying, self-deceiving cruelty. "That's not the point," she said. "What she feels isn't anything you can control. The only things you can determine are the things inside you. You can find out whether you love her."

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He looked her full in the eyes. "I don't know. I don't know, Ruth. You tell me. Do I love her?"

"It's none of my business," she said coldly, and rose.

She heard him scrambling on the rocks as he got up, but she walked on—she would not put out a hand to help him. She hated him, she hated this degrading conversation, she hated his masochistic wife, she hated herself for allowing herself to know anything about it. She thought she would go home and heat water for a bath. That was how this afternoon made her feel. In need of a bath. Horrid!

Then suddenly she heard him cry out and she turned. He was a few yards behind her, leaning on his cane, his hand clapped to his thigh, his face grey under its tan. At once she turned and ran back to him over the rocks with a hasty sure-footedness she had not imagined was in her.

"What is it?" she cried, and put her arm under his to uphold him—and pushed her tongue hard against her teeth to prevent its forming the further words, My darling.

"My leg," he said, his jaw clamped. "I pulled the scar. I do it sometimes—"

"Sit down and rest until the pain gets better."

He shook his head. "Then I can't get up."

"Can you walk?"

"I'll try."

"Then put your weight on me—it won't be so bad once we're off the rocks."

He took hold of her shoulder with his big hand and gave his weight to her. He was so heavy she didn't think she could bear it. As they crept on, she thought she would die, die. Holding her arm around his wide back, her mittened hand under his armpit, taking his weight on her own bones, sustaining it with her own muscles, she thought she would die with the burden of wanting him. She said nothing, biting the inside of her lips, only hearing her breath whistling through her nostrils.

He was not stupid. Perhaps his pain had abated, perhaps he was used to how it came and went and could disregard it—at any rate, it did not prevent his sensing very well how it was with her. The moment they stepped off the breakwater onto the hard-packed sand, he turned her round with his huge hands, he swung her into his arms as he would have steered some craft into harbor, he laid his warm full lips on her mouth, and it was all up with her. Like a dying person, she said a short goodbye to herself and gave up to it.

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Not to *him*, to *it*. It raged through her like fire and tempest; she wondered that their clothes did not take flame and leave them naked, as they wished to be. It was he who pushed her away at last, and said with a funny little smile, "Let's go home."

"Yes," she answered, but she stood like a sleepwalker until he touched her arm and said, "Help me. My leg's still bad."

In a dream, she lent herself to his weight again. She supported him down the cracked, sandy sidewalk where the dried beach grass grew between the broken cement; she thought she would die—yes, die (if she were not by this time actually dead but somehow still walking)—before they reached her house, climbed the last difficult steps, went inside, and locked the door.

When it was all over, and the house was her own once more, she slept a while, and then woke in the twilight, feeling as empty and shipwrecked as some waterlogged vessel left behind by the tide. She raised herself carefully from the disheveled bed, stepped into her slippers, and put her arms into the sleeves of her padded robe, then carried herself gently down the stairs. A few coals still glowed in the Franklin stove in the living room—otherwise it was nearly dark. The banjo clock that she wound only to hear it tick, since it kept no time at all, made a sound like water dripping in the still room. In the dimness she saw Maurice rise from the seat of the wing chair, stretch each inch of himself carefully from the claws of his forepaws to the tip of his tail, yawn, and acknowledge her presence with a purr.

She went to the front door and opened it. The cottages across the way loomed dark and blind with their shuttered windows, while above them the first stars of evening blazed on the purple gloom. Her breath went out milkily on the still air, but she did not feel the cold. She felt nothing as yet but her own warmth and the beautiful lazy freedom in all her joints. She stretched, like Maurice, and closed the door.

She found her way to the kitchen and lighted the kerosene lamps. She put wood in the range and filled the kettle. She laid herself a tray and brewed the tea. She made two trips, first with the lamp, then with the tray, into the living room. With the tea things on the hassock before her, she sat down in the wing chair by the fire. Where was he now? Home with his pathetic wife? Certainly not walking the streets in any lover's frenzy. Why had she done such a thing? She had not meant to at all. She had better go away from here. She

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could not feel guilt—she could not yet feel any emotion while her body still felt so lighted from within by pure peace and perfect ease, but already she perceived what it was she would soon feel. Self-contempt and degradation—a sense of having fouled her nest by the commission of an act which was against her own judgment. Where would her old calm be then, and the satisfying ache of her loneliness? She leaned back and pressed her hand across her eyes. Her red hair lay tumbled on her shoulders, her whole being felt in disarray. A loose woman—that was precisely how she felt!—loose! With an exclamation, she jumped up and, carrying a lamp, ran upstairs. She dressed, threw clothes into a suitcase, studied a timetable, and, locking up the house hurriedly, walked the three blocks to the station, where she waited a half hour for the Boston train.

But after three days in Boston, spent in the purifying and impersonal atmosphere of a hotel room, with its bathroom of white tiles, its innerspring mattress, its Gideon Bible in the bed-table drawer, its soothing impersonality, and also in the public library (she did not propose to waste her time) and at a concert and a movie (she meant neither to brood nor to be bored), the whole tempest withdrew over the horizon of her being. She had a night quite free from dreams of Porfirio Marco; the whole matter began, at last, to seem to her both remote and silly. In fact, she was herself again. She felt a little sheepish, a little like a child who knows it has been naughty, and she certainly did not propose that the incident should have a sequel, but who can *really* regret those rare moments when impulse rules?

She thought of possible consequences and could not see what they would be, beyond the nuisance of making clear to him that in spite of anything, she was through for once and all. She certainly had no guilt pangs about his wife, since she knew quite well that she was neither the first nor would she be the last to catch Porfirio's so susceptibly wandering eye. No, she felt only like a fool, which was not wholly comfortable but on the other hand came as a relief in contrast to the faint yet dark forebodings which had hovered at the edge of her consciousness on the night she had fled. Now it was time to go back; she had left the house in disorder—my God, had she even let Maurice out? There was a meal for him in the kitchen, but still—poor cat!

Back she went, as precipitately as she had come, her old competent self once more, in her neat tailored suit, her neat shining hair, turning the pages of a magazine in the chair car. She had a shame-

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faced moment of relief as she walked down the street to see that the old house still stood. She had not even stopped to put out the fire. It was twilight, as when she had left, and her house was as dark as the cottages across the way, but far more compact and sturdy, for it had been a whaling captain's house in the days when the town was a fishing village instead of a summer resort. As she put down her suitcase and unlocked the door, Maurice came through the bushes at the side of the house and cried out to her in a perfect facsimile of scolding rage. She made a face at him and let him in.

Inside, the house had the terrible still cold of houses that have been left unheated in the winter. She left her outdoor things on and went to the kitchen, Maurice racing before her. She lighted the lamps and the stove and went into the cellar to start the dead furnace again. In the living room, she found her unwashed tea things on the hassock. A little shiver went over her. For a moment she was sitting there once more with her hair tumbled on her shoulders and that cold stale tea hot. She rubbed her hand to dispel the chill and was glad there was so much work to do.

She worked until ten o'clock and cleaned in all the corners of all the rooms of the house that had not been shut off. Then she heated water in the kitchen and took a bath. It was a nuisance not to have hot water running, yet one of her pleasures here was in bathing in the kitchen from the copper pan beside the warm range. She pulled down the shades, set out her towels, her fresh nightdress, her robe, her cologne, her powder. She stood ankle-deep in the warm soapy water she had heated in the kettle and attended carefully to her cleanliness.

A blistered mirror hung on the kitchen wall. In it, she saw the image of herself, stooping in the big lamplit room, with her copper hair piled on her head, the copper pan at her feet, like some *baigneuse* by Degas or Renoir. The picture pleased her so much that she would have liked to have had it to keep. When she had finished washing and drying, she perfumed and powdered herself and brushed her hair. She put on her night things and poured herself a glass of beer, but before she took it to the living room she stepped out on the front stoop to empty the mailbox.

As soon as she opened it, several little folded slips of paper fell out. She took the collection of envelopes inside. Between them, she found more of the folded slips thrusting out their corners. She knew

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at once what they were. Notes from him. She went inside and sat down by the fire to unfold them.

"Darling Ruth . . . How marvelous you are . . . I have been thinking of how we must go away together to where it is warm . . . It was so simple and innocent, like two children . . . I am so lucky to have found you . . . Come back, come back! It is you I want, now I know . . . Where are you?" And so forth. "Now really!" she exclaimed several times, skimming through them hastily.

Oh dear! she thought, and Oh dear! running through the rest of the mail before she turned back to think of him. At first a thrill of anger rang through her because she was sick of him, sick of the thought of him—why did he refuse to be put away? But then it really seemed to her that she had only herself to blame. She was a grown woman, her eyes were open, and she had certainly led with her chin! It occurred to her that if she were any kind of an actress, the easiest way to have got rid of him would have been to move toward him, not away. How terrified he would be if she were to say to him: Yes, let us fly to Tahiti! Book air passage at once! He felt so safe in her aloofness. He was so sure he would never be left with her on his hands.

In the morning, she had breakfast by the fire and set off to the grocery with a marketing list. The cold clear weather was holding. She whistled as she strode along. On her way she met an acquaintance, a middle-aged woman who kept a gift shop in the summer.

"I hear you're Porfirio Marco's new girl!" the woman cried with unbearable coyness, sidling past her as if preparing to run.

Ruth nearly started visibly with the sting of this flick, but managed to stop herself in time. "Oh, am I?" she said coolly.

The woman tittered. "Well, you know," she said, "every time a new girl comes to the neighborhood, pretty soon, if she isn't cross-eyed, Porfirio's there, *calling* on her." Her eyes were teary from the cold. She took her handkerchief from her bag and wiped them, giving the impression that the whole business moved her to weep. "In the end, though, he always goes back to his wife," she added pointedly.

Always *has*, Ruth wanted to correct her, but saved herself from saying it just in time. "If she would be able to keep him at home now," she said distantly, "I'd be very much obliged to her, as I've a great deal of work on my hands."

The woman tittered again and cried, "Oh, my, yes, I'll tell her if you really want me to!" and Ruth, leaving her abruptly, cursed her

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own ineptness. She prided herself on being rude only when she meant to be; this time she had not intended it at all. The remark *would* get back to his wife—oh, how right that first instinct of hers had been which had told her that Porfirio Marco would be a nuisance and a pest! She had half an impulse to go back and waylay the woman to explain somehow, yet she knew this would only make her initial awkwardness worse. Besides, she had already reached the business section of the town, and just before her, in her drab tweed coat and headscarf, her empty market basket seeming to weight down her arm, Marjorie Marco appeared, turning in at the A & P.

Then it came to Ruth what she could do to settle the whole thing. She would introduce herself and invite the two of them to dinner, where she would be nice, impersonally nice, to them both. Would that not settle it all and show where she stood without a single word? She hurried on into the store.

"Mrs. Marco?" she said, coming up behind her at the meat counter, her voice sounding nearly triumphant in her own ears. "I'm Ruth Radway—I'm living in the old Nash house this winter. Your husband has dropped in on me a few times and I keep asking him to bring you, too. I wish you'd both come to dinner one night soon."

"Oh," the girl said, looking small and pale and even frightened, stepping back as if to escape the barrage of Ruth's social graces, "How do you do? Thank you very much. Yes, Porfirio told me about you."

"How about Tuesday?" pursued Ruth, smiling, and feeling before this wispy creature like a fat spider inviting a small undernourished fly.

"T-tuesday?" said Marjorie. "Why thank you, I don't believe we have an engagement."

"Then you must come at seven. I'll be looking forward to seeing you."

"Thank you very much," said the girl, and turned with apparent relief when the butcher said, "Who's next?"

Ruth walked home after she had done her shopping, not liking herself much, feeling that the morning had gone wrong. She had behaved toward that girl like the sort of person she didn't herself care for at all. She didn't feel in the least like a big overpowering female, yet that was the way she had acted. Well, she would make up for it on Tuesday, when she would be perfectly stupendously nice to her. She didn't dislike her. She had no feeling for her at all.

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Tuesday was three days away. How could she avoid *him* in the meantime?

It turned out to be quite simple. He did not appear. Evidently it was the result of her invitation, but how? Was he furious? Tired of her? Or did he, by some improbable chance, understand how she was feeling? She could not tell. She spent all of Tuesday buying food and liquor, cleaning and cooking, taking a bath, making herself, in her own vein, beautiful. She set a table in front of the Franklin stove in the living room and made martinis. A casserole of oysters made with cream and sherry burbled in the oven; a pan of apples stuffed with sausage meat sizzled beside it. The dressing for the salad was made with blue cheese and ready to be mixed with the greens. Her mouth watered. She hoped nothing burned, and the unacceptable but sincere thought crept into her mind that the guests were not worthy of the meal.

They came promptly at seven, but not before she had experienced that little hostesslike feeling that the party was prepared but the guests had not yet come and there was nothing to do. The temptation to drink a preliminary cocktail. The moment of the heart in the throat when she wondered why in God's name she had invited them at all. Then their knock sounded, she opened the door, and they were there in her entrance hall, taking off their wraps. The little wife was more made-up than Ruth had ever seen her, with a spot of rouge on each cheek. She wore one of those embroidered peasant blouses which look well only on peasants. She seemed gauche and oversha-dowed and frightened and all wrong. Ruth hurried to put a martini in her hand, not looking at Porfirio.

Then the flurry of arrival died down and they were seated before the fire with nothing to do but talk to each other. From the instant the evening began, it was dreadful, and *he* was at the root of all its dreadfulness. He behaved—how could she describe to herself how he behaved? Like a boy who takes his little brother to a friend's house where he wholly ignores him? Or perhaps that he emanated an unspoken but distinct impression that he was married to both women, but that Ruth, being the more recently acquired, was the favorite. She had observed many modes in which husbands were rude to their wives in public, all distasteful to her, but none, she thought, that rivaled this for sheer unpleasantness. He tried to make her a part of it, too, excluding Marjorie by recalling to Ruth things

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they had talked of together when he had come to call—she trembled for what would be next.

Her manners overruled her judgment and she offered him a second cocktail. He took it, becoming more and more garrulous, until finally, during the meal, he began telling off-color and not very funny stories, to which his wife would cry in distress, "Oh, Porfirio!" Her face was pinched and white under the rouge; she resisted all attempts to be drawn into the conversation. But then it was doubtful that he would have allowed any conversation to exist but his own. Ruth could not make him out at all. The false politeness, the oiliness—she would have welcomed them back, but they were gone. In their place was a blustering noisiness mixed with calf-eyed glances directed at her with great significance. She wished she were anywhere but here; she wished she could feign sudden illness; she looked at the clock and was confirmed in her worst fears—it had stopped; time stood still.

He sat in the wing chair with his leg out stiff before him while the two women sat on the couch. "The man who wants to paint," he said, gesturing widely, "has to be alone. Alone and free. Unencumbered. He has to be unencumbered."

"Oh, I don't know that that's true, dear," said Marjorie primly. "Plenty of painters—"

"It's true," he rode her down. "*Ruth* knows it's true. He has to be quiet. He has to be very quiet and look into his inner self. When he is quiet enough, a little plant begins to grow. It grows and grows until it fills him up and he has to put it down in a painting."

He made her sick! Things which he had said to her, apparently out of his deepest, truest experience, he was somehow prostituting now, saying them at a time when they should not be said. In a childlike way, she supposed, he was feeling her disapproval and was repeating over the words that once had pleased her in the hope that they would do so again. But she had had enough and more of childlike men! She preferred to take her men and children separately! "Porfirio," she said tartly, "*please* let's not be sincere about our art. This is a social occasion."

To her surprise, Marjorie laughed out suddenly, a ladylike guffaw. "Now!" she said. "Now, he's met someone who can tell him off!" He said nothing, but Ruth did not like the way he looked at his wife. He was cruel, really cruel, not just vain and egotistical—she saw it in that look. She did not like to think of what must go on at home. She imagined big blue bruises on Marjorie's thin arms under the

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peasant blouse. She looked at his big hands. She knew that when they left here he would make Marjorie suffer for her own disapproval. She never wanted to see him again—never. She made a bustle getting them another drink, hoping to change the tone.

When at last they left, she experienced such relief that it was as if she had been nearly suffocating and someone had opened a window. Her grateful nerves flowered in the silence of the empty house. She quickly emptied the ashtrays and took the dirty glasses to the kitchen, eliminating any trace of her guests. She took a piece of bread and butter and a glass of milk back by the fire and sat down to collect herself before going to bed.

Around her, the silence moved in and out with her breath, and pulsed with her blood. She smiled, thinking that many women would have been apprehensive, or frightened outright, alone in this old house in this half vacant town. She was not. What was there to be afraid of? Among the few year-round residents, even minor burglaries were nearly unknown—she did not even lock her door at night—and as for the other fears of solitude, she hardly knew what they were. When had loneliness ever been anything but her friend? It was a stern principle to live by, but she thought it would be the best one for her, and she resolved not to depart from it again—no more Porfirio Marcos—not to forget that loneliness was her friend. She supposed that old people came to look so on death, regarding it with surprise, seeing all at once that it was not hostile, as they had always thought—not at all.

She rose, broke up the fire with the poker, blew out all the lamps but one, and carried that into the kitchen along with her empty glass. She opened the back door and Maurice slid in, along with a piece of cold air. She put down a saucer of milk and left him, closing the door behind her.

She climbed the stairs, carrying the lamp, and undressed in her cold bedroom. How quiet it was, how dearly still! Imagine being a Marjorie Marco, who, instead of opening out into solitude after this appalling evening, must make her way home with Porfirio, sleep in the same room with him, and work out with him—since she thought she wanted to—some make-do of living. How cheap one must hold oneself to believe that this was all life had to offer! How cheap one must hold life!

And imagine all the wives, she thought, not in the least caring that she sounded smug even to herself, who never know the luxury

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of a still and empty house, of a private bed, of the absolute freedom to go unquestioned in all their most private movements, to read as late as they like, or simply lie with their hands under their heads, thinking, with no one to ask them if they want to go to sleep now, or how about turning out the light, or will you wake me at seven, or did you send my blue shirt to the laundry. Imagine all the single women, women like herself, who had not yet found out that they did not miss what they were missing. She blew out the lamp and composed herself to sleep. Her last thought was: I have never gotten into anything that I couldn't get out of. I think I will leave this town and go back to the city soon. This week. She slept.

When she woke up, it was absolutely dark, and someone was walking about downstairs. It was not a shutter banging, or the pipes groaning, or the house settling, or the cat. It was the sound of one thing: someone walking downstairs. Quickly, she reviewed what there was in the room heavy enough to use as a weapon. There was a flashlight in the drawer of the bed-table which she found and gripped. Also, she could throw the lamp. There was nothing in the house to steal—the only thing she would have saved in case of fire was her manuscript, and a burglar would hardly care for that.

She sat up in bed and cried loudly, "Who's there?" At this, the steps, instead of halting, as would have seemed natural, changed rhythm, came closer, mounting the stairs.

In spite of herself, her heart began to pound; the instinct of self-preservation planted in her stomach the seed of fear. "Who's there?" she cried again. Footsteps on the landing, and up the last flight of stairs. "Who is it? Who is it?"

The knob turned, the door of her room opened. "Get out or I'll throw the lamp!" she screamed but, groping for it, knocked it off the table. Then it finally occurred to her to shine the flashlight at the doorway. The beam wavered, then found the face of Porfirio.

"Oh, my God!" she said, and began to cry. "Get out of here, get out!" She let the button on the flashlight slip and in the darkness heard him coming toward the bed. She snapped it on again, finding his face.

"Ruth," he said thickly, "don't shine it in my eyes." He reached the bed and sat down at the foot, pulling the covers tight over her legs.

"How dare you!" she cried. "How do you have the unmitigated gall to come here at this hour—"

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"Ruth," he said, "it's all right now. I can come any time now. I can come always."

She felt her heart nearly stop, sitting there in the dark with the weight making the mattress sag and trapping her in sheets and blankets. She snapped the flashlight on again and he said, "Put that out," peremptorily.

"What do you mean?" she asked him. "Do you think that because once we—do you think you can come here without my permission *ever*, much less in the middle of the night? You can by no means always come here!" To herself, her voice sounded tight and hysterical. She dug her fingernails into her palms and tried to rise to some kind of calm.

He seemed to have heard only the last of what she said. "Yes, I can," he said. "She's dead."

There was absolute silence and blackness, with his weight on the bed and the sweat on her palms. She did not ask who was dead.

"I killed her," he added. "I smothered her with the pillow. It wasn't hard. She had a weak heart. I don't think she suffered, Ruth. She hardly struggled. I don't think it was a bad death."

Once more she fought wildly to maintain her superiority, to laugh at him, to scorn him. Poor little Marjorie, he was telling her, I killed her, but it didn't hurt much. But she could not find it in her to be amused. Rather, she thought she might throw up, or faint, or scream, or go mad.

She said, "There's a lamp on the dresser. Light it. I can't stand it here in the dark." And she groped with the beam of the flashlight until she found the lamp, its glass base half full of yellow oil. She felt him rise from the bed and saw him strike a match, lift the chimney, touch the wick to flame. At first it flared, smoked, and blinded her, then settled down as he replaced the chimney.

They stared at each other in the flat light of the unshaded lamp. He did not look like a man who had just killed his wife. His curls hung on his forehead, he wore his black Navy sweater with the high neck under his pea-jacket, bell-bottomed sailor pants. He looked familiar, simply like Porfirio Marco. Probably, she was able to think, her confidence coming back with the light, we make bogies of murderers just as we make heroes of other celebrities. Seen close up, none of them are more than men. Yet even as she looked, she saw that he was more a man than he had ever been, that murder sat on his shoulders like something he had never had—dignity—and she clenched her fists, wishing he had never lit the lamp, for with it he

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had lit another small, recognizable, steady flame that burned inside her chest where she had no means of extinguishing it.

"What has this to do with me?" she asked coldly and tried to call herself into anger, since she could not induce scorn. My God, how she despised such a creature—he could not even commit murder alone but must come running to some woman!

"Ruth, Ruth," he cried in a strangled voice, "are you made of ice? I did it for you!"

Then she was furious beyond all control, trembling with rage. "You did it for me!" she screamed. "You killed your wife for me! Now you expect that I will be the great mother-image who will take the responsibility for you! Go to your church and pass the buck to your plaster saints, but don't come leaning on me! If you think I won't go straight to the police, you're very much mistaken, Porfirio Marco!"

"But, Ruth," he cried in a stricken voice, "but, Ruth, you don't understand! Look, I've got plenty of girls! Who would I do such a thing for but you? Didn't you say to me you're tired of people who don't play for keeps? Be selfish, you told me. Please yourself. You asked me if I wanted to be married. You said I should ask myself. I never talked to anybody like I did to you! Didn't what was between us mean anything to you?"

A moment of silence fell in which all the things she had ever said to him echoed, garbled, in her ringing ears. In a split second of clarity she knew that what was wrong with them was not that they were false, but that they had nothing to do with Porfirio Marco. She had meant every word of them, but she had been talking to herself. Porfirio was not an object, after all, but a man, and in that man's mouth her cool words had turned incendiary. It was too much for her, too much! She began to shout at him in real hysteria—obscenities, anything, everything, over and over. "Get out, get out, you murderer, get out, I'm going to call the police!"

But even now the part of herself that was not screaming, the innermost, intact Ruth, saw him in the strange, weak lamplight, looking huge as a boulder, blocked in shadow, heavy-limbed and male, his head lowered under the hail of her words. The butterfly-shaped flame in her chest that matched the one on the lamp wick flared and smoked and made her scream louder to drown out the wish to take his big black curly head between her breasts and press it against that flame—extinguish it, perhaps, with his enormous shadow. Once he raised his big hands and looked at them. That little

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Ruth who lived so far within the layers of her consciousness took in the gesture coolly, saw what it meant, knew what he had in mind, and remarked, with the last bit of that objectiveness that she so enjoyed, that what she was getting she had asked for.

"Oh, Ruth," he said finally, his voice so deep that it vibrated in her head and stopped her hysterical chatter, "I thought you liked me!"

She saw him rise, and she lay back quietly on the pillow. As he got up, he made a grimace of pain and clapped his hand to his wounded thigh. He walked a few tortured halting steps to the head of the bed, and as she watched him a senseless explosion of feeling came over her. Once more she was limp and yet on fire with uninvited longing. The watchful, untouchable Ruth gave a few inarticulate protests and went up like paper, charred to ash in an instant. She thought she would die, and there was no question of objection when he sat down again at the head of the bed, laid his hands on her shoulders and his lips to her mouth. She felt his kiss, and then his hands at her throat, and she saw it all and knew it was all up with her.

As he choked her, she said a short goodbye to herself, and like a person passing down into the most turbulent depths of love, she gave herself up to it. She kicked and gasped and struck out, but those were only things her body did that she could not help. In the end, she passed into it willingly—lights burst before her eyes, some short meaningless dreams took place in her head, and with a sense of absolute fulfillment, she died.

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THE JURY BOX
by ALLEN J. HUBIN

"Write about what you know" is advice frequently given to aspiring writers. Three people have recently followed that prescription to good effect in their debuts in our field.

Guy Townsend has a Ph.D. in British history and is a particular student of and writer on the Fifteenth Century and the mysterious deaths of the princes in the Tower of London. He offers us *To Prove a Villain* (Perseverence Press, P.O. Box 384, Menlo Park, CA 94026; $6.95). This is set in Brookleigh College, an institution beset with passions, intrigues, and murder. It features Dr. John Forest, history professor, as narrator and sleuth. Worked into this tale, in most entertaining and illuminating fashion, are both the arguments on the two principal sides of the 1483 mystery in the tower (including a scathing denunciation of Josephine Tey's *A Daughter of Time*, long considered a classic detective novel) and a contemporary reincarnation of that early murder case. An English professor, a lady of strong mind and weak morals, is murdered. Links with a previous death and portents of one in the future are found, and Dr. Forest blithely puts his head in the mouths of lions past and present.

Jacquelyn Nowack, art historian and professor, conjures up the seething Art History Department of a midwestern college in *Death at the Crossings* (Dodd Mead, $14.95). Here the overripe corpse of an art student is found in the cellar of the elderly building housing the department. Sergeant Mike Miner finds the faculty uniformly devious: the truth must be pried out of these polished liars and, equally difficult, identified as such. A tedious job, but the telling of it is far from tedious; in fact, this is an artful novel, with well fleshed people and a nice twist at the end.

Susan Kelly, who teaches at Harvard and at the Cambridge police academy, uses this background well in *The Gemini Man* (Walker, $14.95). Liz Connors, a thirtyish freelance writer with a policeman for a sometimes bedmate, discovers the butchered, raped body of a fellow occupant of her apartment building. Some animal is making a career of these things, for as the cold Cambridge November unwinds more women die at his hands, events circling ever closer to Liz. She's of inquiring mind, disposed to ask a few questions—a few perilous questions—on her own. A very capable debut.

Another marvelously cockeyed, witty, and inventive tale of Hong Kong's Yellowthread Street is *The Far Away Man* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, $14.95) by William Marshall. Three troublesome matters attend Detective Inspector Harry Feiffer and his minions: 1) The invisible suicide of Kamikaze Man-

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sions, who dives off an upper story every few minutes and hits the courtyard with a resounding thump. 2) Detective Inspector Auden, with a fascination for exotic handguns, has randomly disassembled hundreds of them in the police station basement. 3) Someone is walking the streets of Hong Kong, dispatching his victims with an antique single-shot pistol; the dead are each carrying a pair of unrelated cholera-vaccination certifications. Don't miss this!

A further tale in this series is also available, hot on the heels of the above. This is *Roadshow* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, $14.95). Here the bizarre antics continue, but there is less humor. Some folks are assassinating the roof of a Buddhist monastery, to the utter bafflement of a pair of Feiffer's officers, one of whom develops a near-terminal association with pigeon dung. More serious are the miscreants who are killing Hong Kong streets with well placed charges of homemade explosives. Their antics seem utterly pointless (who benefits from a dead street?), and they turn ugly when a streetful of people is turned into charred unidentifiable logs. Feiffer is beside himself, as is a colleague who came to tame Hong Kong's frenzied traffic and not to inspect blackened corpses. And Inspector O'Yee has a great puzzlement: he spends hours trying to find out what language to speak to a stray dog which has somehow invaded both the precinct and his heart. All this leads to a magnificently graphic finale.

The ever-reliable Gavin Lyall returns with another international-intrigue novel about Major Harry Maxim in *The Crocus List* (Viking, $15.95). During a visit of the U.S. President to England, an assassin's attack leaves dead only a minor English diplomat—and the assassin. Deep breaths all around, but Maxim thinks the assassin did not act alone; that, in fact, the President was never the target. This is a highly unpopular viewpoint, one that could be the death of Maxim. Who would kill the diplomat, and why, what role is the KGB playing, and what does all this have to do with a clandestine unit established in England by an American many years before? Excellent storytelling, with knife-edge suspense.

Joe L. Hensley, attorney and judge in Indiana, brings back his series character, Indiana attorney Don Robak, in *Robak's Cross* (Doubleday, $12.95). Ed Sager, businessman turned continuous drunk, is found clutching a gun over the dead body of his perpetually unfaithful wife. At every opportunity he confesses to murdering her, signs all such confessions, and asks for the death penalty. Sager is Robak's client. How can he construct even a distraction, much less a defense, out of this? Hensley is a very able craftsman, and the plot and people of this tale well illustrate his prowess.

Red Chameleon (St. Martin's, $13.95) is the first of the three novels about Inspector Porfiry Rostnikov by Stuart M. Kaminsky I've read. These are police procedurals set in Moscow. The inspector has

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a Jewish wife, longs and schemes to emigrate, is accordingly relegated to the investigation of minor crimes, yet manages to maneuver and survive among the deadly intrigues and poisonous personalities of Moscow jurisprudence. Here someone shoots to death an aged Jew in his bath. The death of a Jew being a Russian triviality, the case goes to Rostnikov. But following the trail of evidence leads to dangerous territory, and Porfiry is ordered off. In addition, there's the uncommon matter of car thieves successfully operating on Moscow's streets—this too turns tricky when the Procurator's car is nabbed. And more still: a sniper is at work atop Moscow's hotels. On the basis of *Chameleon,* this series is a lively treasure of atmosphere, characterization, and setting.

Yet another worthy first novel is *Sleeping Dog* (Arbor House, $15.95) by Dick Lochte. This introduces a most engaging pair: Leo Bloodworth, middle-aged, thrice married, a private eye; and Serendipity Renn Dahlquist, precocious fourteen-year-old with the vocabulary of a doctoral student and the brashness of the teenager she is. What sets this affair off is a hideous event: Serendipity's beloved dog vanishes and she retains Leo's services. Her grandmother, with whom she lives, is a famous TV soap-opera star; her mother, who shows up only periodically with her latest lover in tow, may have taken the dog. What has all this to do with Mafian enterprises and murder? The answers are both funny and great good fun to read.

Follow the Sharks (St. Martin's, $13.95), the third of William G. Tapply's novels about Boston attorney Brady Coyne, is most satisfactory. It returns us to the intensity of feeling and narrative drive of Tapply's debut. Ten-year-old E. J. Donagan is kidnaped and ransom demanded. E. J. is the son of Eddie Donagan, briefly a star pitcher with the Red Sox twelve years ago. The intervening years have not been kind to Eddie or to his marriage to Jan, daughter of wealthy Coyne client Sam Farina. Jan and Sam—and Eddie, too, for that matter—are now much more than clients. Their pain is Coyne's and, when asked to help, he tries, not always successfully and usually to the enragement of the FBI agent assigned to the case. There's dying yet to be done; must it include E.J.?

Emily Pollifax, grandmotherly volunteer secret-agent, returns in *Mrs. Pollifax and the Hong Kong Buddha* (Doubleday, $14.95). Emily is asked to go to Hong Kong, where a Chinese refugee she'd earlier befriended is in trouble and the local American contact seems to be falling apart or, worse, leaking to the enemy. In Hong Kong Emily again encounters Robin Burke-Jones, cat burglar turned Interpol investigator. They find their separate interests merging into a common desperate attempt to thwart a terrorist plot. Here we have charm, humor, engaging narrative, and inoffensive unbelievability.

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SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT TO EQMM READERS

We are delighted to announce the winner of the first *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* Readers Award—for the short story you voted the most admirable and memorable of all those published in *EQMM* in 1985:

ANIMALS by Clark Howard

"Animals," the story of a down-and-out 62-year-old widower and an "incorrigible" member of a street gang who join forces to put out of business consumer laboratories that use stray animals for experimentation, appeared in the June '85 issue and was met with an applause of appreciative mail. The enthusiasm was obviously lasting, as witness this response to our first EQMM Readers Award contest. Add to this supreme vote of confidence the fact that another of Clark Howard's sensitive but forthright stories—"McCulla's Kid" in the September issue—received the third highest vote.

Sandwiched between these two stories, with second highest vote, is Lawrence Block's "Like a Bug on a Windshield," which appeared in the August issue. Our impressed and grateful congratulations to Mr. Howard and to Mr. Block, and to two other regular contributors, who earned a high vote count for a number of their stories—Edward D. Hoch (28 votes for ten stories, the greatest number for "The Theft of the Cardboard Castle" in the November issue) and James Powell (25 votes for five stories, the greatest number for "The Dunderhead Bus" in the August issue).

Counting the ballots has been an edifying and exciting experience for your editors and we hope you will vote for your favorite story every year from now on. There will be a ballot in the Mid-December issue and we urge you to note down your favorite stories between now and then so that you can vote wisely for the EQMM story you consider the most outstanding of 1986.

P.S. To those who accidentally voted for a 1986 story in this 1985 contest (e.g., Dori MacDonald's "The Pride of Mrs. Williams" in the January 1986 issue received a number of votes), please use the 1986 ballot to recast your vote if it remains the same. We could not consider any 1986 stories sent to us on a 1985 ballot. It's the issue date that counts, not the copyright line under the story.

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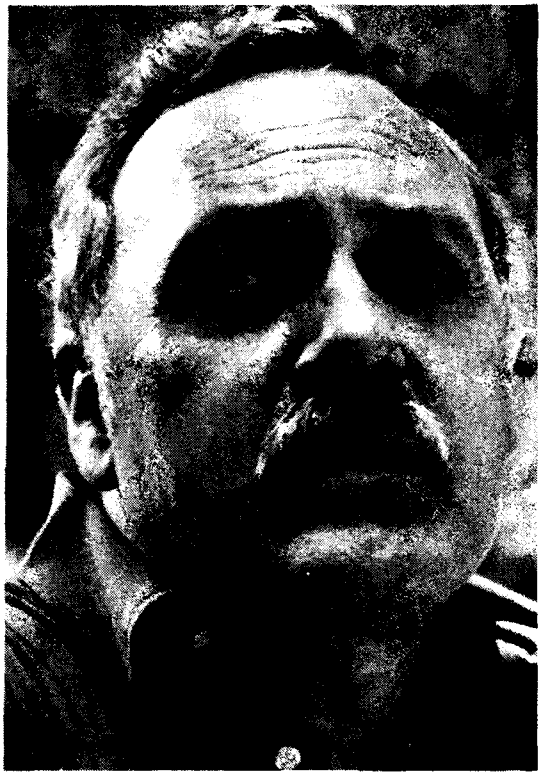

Photograph by Judith Howard

CLARK HOWARD

Clark Howard has written over 175 short stories ("Horn Man," *EQMM* 6/2/80, won an Edgar from the Mystery Writers of America) and over 15 books (the latest, a novel—*Dirt Rich*—is due from Richard Marek/St. Martin's Press this spring). He has also written for television *(Last of the Good Guys* was a CBS Movie of the Week in 1978), but he says short stories are his first love and he returns to them for recreation when he wants relief from other writing. (Oh, do it, all you versatile writers out there, do it!) Besides belonging to several writers organizations, he is a member of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency and The American Correctional Association.

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a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

"Somebody comes in with a big wash," Flora explained. "A couple of bags full. It needs two machines and they pay me for two. After they've gone out, I stuff it all into one machine and keep half the money."

"That means the clothes don't get as clean."

"Tragedy, the world is full of it."

"You can't run an economy without mutual trust."

Flora said, "You must be joking. Look at London, it's thriving. I came down from Scotland to get a wee piece of it. London is rip-off city . . ."

A VISIT TO RIP-OFF CITY

by WILLIAM BANKIER

The bus conductor was a young lad wearing his ticket machine strapped high on his chest like a concertina. Steve Taylor asked him for a fifty-pence ticket. After six weeks of riding the Number 11 bus from Westminster Hospital through to Chelsea, Taylor knew the fare was fifty pence. The youth accepted the coin, set the dial on his machine, cranked out a slip, tore it off, and handed it to the grey-haired passenger with the baby face. "Ta, squire," he said as he swaggered back to the end of the bus.

At eight-thirty in the evening, the bus had a clearish run and was able to speed past a few deserted stops. Taylor sat in a semi-hypnotic state while he was carried past Victoria Station, over Pimlico Road, and along to Sloane Square. They were on the King's Road when he glanced casually at his ticket. The printed code showed the letter

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'C.' Taylor knew 'C' indicated a fare of thirty pence. He had paid fifty; the code should have been 'E.'

He felt only a mild degree of annoyance. The conductor could have made a legitimate mistake, cranking his dial to the wrong letter. More likely, he had done it on purpose, putting twenty pence of Taylor's fare into another pocket. Why worry? Taylor had not been harmed, he was close to his destination. His only embarrassment would be if an inspector boarded the bus and checked all tickets, but this was unlikely in mid-evening. No, London Transport was being ripped off by an employee and why should Taylor care?

"What do you care for?" Flora Corrigan said across the table in The Roebuck. After three weeks, Taylor had become attuned to her Glasgow accent and now understood most of what she said.

"Thieving bothers me. Always has." He swallowed some beer. "Back in Montreal, years ago, guys used to collect the tolls by hand from motorists driving across Jacques Cartier Bridge. Then they modernized the system, put in machines, those baskets you throw a coin into and the barrier rises up."

"Oh, aye," Flora said.

"In the first month, the machines took in forty thousand dollars more than any similar month before. Everything else was normal. The collectors had been keeping back forty grand. It turned out they all owned apartment buildings. We never were told who they had been paying off."

"What do you expect people to do?" Flora asked him. She had merry eyes, the palest shade of blue, and waves of jet-black hair worn without much style around her pale, heavy face.

"I expect them not to cheat. Not to steal."

"Stevieee," she said on a scolding note and it was all she needed to say. They both knew he was only an hour and a few miles away from saying goodnight to his wife, soldiering on through her sixth week of confinement in the osteopathic ward at the Westminster, recovering from a painful fracture of the pelvis.

"It isn't the same. Irene and I have an understanding."

"Ach, sure."

"We do, we do." Taylor did not go on. He had told Flora weeks ago about the situation between his wife and his partner, Ralph Ness. He had described their plans for the trip to England, a last-ditch attempt to discover if there was anything in the marriage worth saving.

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Flora raised her glass of dark beer, drank, and set it down. "I have my own fiddle going at the launderama," she announced.

"Go ahead, depress me some more." Taylor had noticed her careless efficiency the first morning he came into the place with a bundle of dirty clothing. He had time to kill, so instead of passing the load across the counter and paying the Scottish girl to do it as one of her "service washes," he put it through the machines himself and sat for an hour, watching her work. Her bicycle was parked inside, leaning against the front window—customers coming in had to pick their way around it. For some reason, he had liked that.

"Somebody comes in with a big wash," Flora explained. "A couple of bags full. It needs two machines and they pay me for two. After they've gone out, I stuff it all into one machine and keep half the money."

"That means the clothes don't get as clean."

"Tragedy, the world is full of it."

He finished his drink and went to the bar for a refill. While he waited, he thought about the problems he and Ralph had faced years ago getting Taylor-Ness Promotions going. The gifts to agency people. The rebates on key accounts. When he came back to her he said, "You can't run an economy without mutual trust."

Flora said, "You must be joking. Look at London, it's thriving. I came down from Scotland to get a wee piece of it. London is rip-off city."

In the morning, Taylor got out of bed in time to watch Flora giving breakfast to her little girl before taking her away to school. Bonnie's skin was brown from her father, her pale-blue eyes a striking contrast. The young man had gone back to Bristol, thence to sea as far as Flora knew. He never wrote, never sent money. Never mind, she had no intention of marrying him—let him strike an iceberg and sink to the bottom of the Atlantic. With her Canadian in tow, she had help with the rent for as much time as it took his wife's pelvis to heal. Nobody's future carried a longer guarantee.

Mother and daughter were at the door. Taylor got up from the table, carrying his coffee with him. He kissed them both, his dressing gown sliding away from pale ankles as he bent to Bonnie's level. Uncanny. Twenty-five years ago in Montreal, Irene had done this on weekday mornings while he headed out for work, dropping off Jennifer at school on the way. Now Jenny had her own life going

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in Toronto and Irene was taking a hospital breakfast with a dozen strangers.

"Are you visiting the hospital this afternoon?"

"As always."

"When do you talk to the doctor?"

"Could be today."

She gave him a glance, chin up, face half turned away. "It'll be a relief to be rid of you."

He put his head out of the doorway into the corridor and said after her as she guided Bonnie down the twisting stairway, "I'll come back early. We can have supper together, the three of us." He saw the child's eyes rise to her mother's face. "I'll bring take-away Chinese."

When Taylor arrived at the hospital for start of visiting hours at two o'clock, Irene had already been seen by the specialist. She met her husband in the ward doorway, on her way out for one of her determined walks, balancing expertly now on aluminum crutches. Her face confronted him with a triumphant smile. "Tomorrow," she announced. "They tell me I can leave tomorrow afternoon!"

"Great news!" Taylor embraced his new wife, the frail one who radiated a disturbing, feverish warmth, replacing the cool, sturdy Irene of all their years together.

"There's no reason, they say, why I can't do the physiotherapy at home. The thing is, I'm cleared for travel." She glanced over her shoulder at the high-ceilinged room full of beds. "Book the flight, Steve," she said as she crept toward the communal toilet. "I don't care if you have to buy the airline."

Left alone, Taylor set out on his round of visiting the other patients. This was something he did well, maintaining low-key, short-term relationships with elderly ladies. He teased them, made them laugh, and assured himself that this did them as much good as some of the medicines they were taking.

When Irene came out of the bathroom, he went with her for a slow walk down the corridor, past the open doorways of wards occupied by patients less mobile then Irene Taylor. "You must be starved for Ralph's company," Taylor said.

"There's no need to put it like that."

"He'll have been missing you, too."

She stopped in the broad part of the corridor facing the elevator

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doors. Tomorrow she would ride one of these to freedom. "We tried," she said. "We gave it seven weeks."

"Would things have been different if you hadn't got hurt? If we'd toured England the way we planned, both of us healthy, could we have saved it?"

He thought his wife's face looked good with the cheekbones showing prominently, like a fashion model. He remembered the plump Irene, two days off the plane from Montreal, one moment inspired by the ceremony outside Buckingham Palace, next stretched unconscious on the pavement. There was nobody to blame, the car had not been speeding. It was just bad luck that she was concussed and suffered the fractured pelvis.

"Could we have saved the marriage?" She echoed his question, gave it some thought. "I guess we'll never know."

When Taylor concluded his visit, departed the ward, and hurried down four flights of stairs to the hospital lobby, he estimated it was too early to bus out to Chelsea. If the food was to be hot from the take-away, he needed to waste three quarters of an hour. So he decided to relax on a leather settee near the main doors, where visitors, nurses, doctors, and orderlies came and went constantly and the people-watching was outstanding.

A man left his chair near the telephone and came to stand over Taylor, bending, cigarette extended. "Mind if I use your ashtray?"

"Go ahead."

He was reasonably well dressed in tweed jacket, shirt and tie, corduroy trousers, and suede shoes, but the entire outfit looked rained on and slept in, more than one night. He sat down now in the chair beside Taylor. "Waiting for a phone call," he said.

"Mmm."

"Came all the way down from Oxford to visit a friend and he's checked himself out. He's all full up with pneumonia."

Taylor shook his head.

"Nobody knows where he's gone. Discharged himself from the hospital. I rang up a friend in Oxford to find out if he's been in touch. They haven't heard."

"Sorry about that."

"I've got no money to get back. My friend was going to lend me the bus fare." The failed assistant librarian raised his eyebrows at Taylor. "I suppose I'd better get out and try to hitch a ride. Hope it doesn't start raining."

"How much is the bus fare?"

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"You're a gentleman, sir. Two pounds will see me home and dry."

Leaving the hospital and hurrying up Great Smith Street to Victoria, Taylor took his place at the bus stop. He was waiting alone, a bus having just passed. A good-looking youth in neat jeans and a clean shirt approached him and, putting his head close, began talking quickly. The sing-song Welsh accent was appealing, even though much of what he had to say was lost on Canadian ears. "Alone in London . . . me Mam and Dah came down from Cardiff . . . can't find a job . . . just a few pence to buy some crisps or something. . . ."

Taylor was nodding in rhythm with the litany, which, despite its content, sounded more joyful than sad. "A few pence isn't much," he said, reaching into his shirt pocket and pulling out a folded banknote. "Here, take a pound."

"Thank you, sir, thank you." The boy sped away like a dog off the leash as Taylor's bus rounded the corner from Parliament Square and bore down on him.

Balancing cartons of hot Chinese food, Taylor rapped on the door of Flora's apartment. He heard Bonnie's running approach and her cry, "Come in, come in, come in!" as Flora unfastened the chain, both locks, the latch.

They ate around the kitchen table, pouring out the balance of yesterday's wine from a 2-liter bottle. Flora asked him, "Is the flight confirmed?"

"Four o'clock tomorrow."

"Your wife must be happy."

"What do your football fans say?"

"Over the moon?"

"Irene is over the moon." Taylor added more plum sauce to Bonnie's rice. He topped her glass with milk from a carton. "She's looking forward to seeing Ralph Ness."

"What will you do?"

"Get back to work." The business was in a promising position but it would require dedicated efforts from both partners to see it up and on to the next plateau. A lot of companies were buying audio-visual programs these days, there was plenty of money in the Taylor-Ness current account. Soon the decision would have to be taken whether to move the premises to a more central location. He would discuss this with Ralph right away. Meanwhile, it was good of his partner

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to have suggested the London vacation. It showed, of course, how confident Ness was that Irene would opt for leaving her husband.

"I know you'll get back to work," Flora said. "I mean what will you do about the other man?"

"What *can* I do? We're all adults. If Irene decides she'd rather be with Ralph, I can't lock her in a room."

The Scottish girl shook her head, baffled by alien values. "You could punch his lights out for a start."

At eight o'clock, they delivered Bonnie in her pajamas to the flat of a neighbor on the floor below and then Taylor followed Flora on down to the street. She wanted to take him out and buy him a farewell drink.

"I'm sick of The Roebuck," she said, "those noisy folk in there. Let's go farther afield."

They climbed aboard one of Taylor's familiar Number 11 buses heading in the direction of Victoria. Flora put her arm under his and linked hands with him. From moment to moment, she looked as if she was about to speak to him but always thought better of it. Taylor didn't probe her silence—he was grateful for it. When they climbed down from the bus on Buckingham Palace Road, she led the way through a narrow doorway that was unidentified but which proved to be the entrance to a first-floor drinking club. The room at the top of the stairs was high-ceilinged, the decor not much changed from when it had been somebody's living room. The clientele were mostly middle-aged, one table of young people. Taylor sensed he was the only tourist in the place.

The waiter knew Flora. He responded to her drink signal without approaching their table. "Watch this," she said to Taylor. "One for your collection."

The waiter put two glasses on his tray, plopped in ice, paid the bartender for two small bottles of soda water, then made a detour to a corner of the room where long maroon drapes covered a window. Working quickly, he found a bottle behind the drapes, poured two whiskies over the rocks, slid his private bottle back out of sight, turned, and approached Flora's table.

"Two pounds twenty, love," he said.

She paid and the waiter drifted away. "If he keeps that up," Taylor said, "the club will go out of business."

"He isn't greedy. He only takes his share."

"The bartender must be aware of what's going on."

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"He pays the bartender." Flora raised her drink. "Happy landings in Montreal."

Taylor tasted and swallowed. At least it was good booze. "How are you and Bonnie going to make out when I'm gone?"

"Would you listen to the man's conceit."

"I'm concerned."

"We survived before you got here. We'll continue to survive."

"Survival," Taylor muttered, as if the word described an obscene activity.

"Don't be so smug. It's a brilliant achievement for most of us these days."

"I'd like to help you." As the whiskey took hold on top of the supper wine, he looked at her with enhanced appreciation. Her hefty build was reassuring to him. "You and the wee girl, I've become attached to you."

"Then leave your wife," Flora said flatly. "Abandon her and stay here in London and live with me and Bonnie." She watched his face for a reaction to her challenge.

"Just like that."

"It's only a suggestion. You aren't expected to do it."

The club served liquor beyond legal pub hours. It was after midnight when Taylor and Flora clattered down the stairway to the street. "No buses now, love," she said. "You're stuck for a taxi."

"My pleasure," Taylor said through numb lips.

His slurred speech gave Flora pleasure. "You aren't as drunk as thinkle peep you are," she said.

Looking out for a cab with its rooflight on, Taylor saw a group of young people sitting on the sidewalk nearby. They were sharing a giant bottle of wine, pouring it into plastic cups. One of them looked familiar—his neat trousers and clean shirt identified him to Taylor as the Welsh lad to whom he had given a pound earlier that evening. But he was talking now in the kind of English they teach at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts. Taylor caught his eye. "Hello."

"Hello yourself."

"How are things in Cardiff?"

The boy grinned as his friends exploded and rolled about. A close-cropped girl with bare feet said, "You passed the audition, Clive, but I don't think you're getting the part."

A taxi pulled up in response to Flora's charge into the middle of the street. She opened the door and bullied Taylor inside, followed

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him, gave the address, and slammed the door. He let his head fall back against the seat. "I don't know whether to laugh or cry."

"What?"

He told her about the way the boy conned him by pretending to be a penniless Welsh visitor. "You and your rip-off city," he concluded.

"Why should things be any different?" she demanded. "Times have changed, thank God. All his working life, my father accepted his little brown envelope on Friday afternoon. He lived in fear of losing his job. . . ." Her voice trailed away.

"I can't hear you."

"I said people have expectations. And with all the money floating around, they have plenty of opportunity. Crime is part of the system—all the way to the top."

"You may be right," Taylor said. "But I still don't like it."

"Join the police, then. That's where all your hypocrites are."

Irene sat on the edge of the bed, dressed for the street. She had lost weight during her eight weeks in hospital; her vacation clothes hung loose. Taylor was making the old ladies laugh by hoisting himself across the ward using his wife's crutches. When he finished his performance and rejoined her, she said, "I don't want to miss that plane."

"We have hours, my dear. No problem."

"Did you pack all my things?"

"Everything is downstairs."

"I want tomorrow to be next Christmas. I want this whole episode to be ancient history."

An empty wheelchair was rolled into the ward propelled by a hospital porter. Taylor watched his wife settle herself in. She exchanged promises with other patients to write letters, to arrange visits, none of it credible. Then they were rolling down the corridor to the elevators, passing for the last time the rooms full of prisoners whose only crime was bad luck.

In the lobby, Taylor went to the desk and reclaimed the bags stowed there by a friendly receptionist. Placing them by the doorway, he came to Irene and said, "I'll go find a cab on Horseferry Road and be right back."

She said, "Good luck."

On the far side of the room near the telephones, Taylor noticed the weatherbeaten librarian in tweed and corduroy. He was stubbing

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a cigarette into an ashtray and speaking confidentially to a white-haired man in blazer and flannels. Taylor missed most of what was being said but caught the words "discharged himself without telling me."

"What's so funny?" Irene asked him.

"People." He went outside in search of a cab.

Being driven along the highway toward the airport, Irene exhaled audibly. "Good Lord, what was that?" she asked herself. "I remember. It's called a relaxed breath."

"You've been to hell and back."

"Not quite as dramatic as that. But one lousy summer." She pinned him with a penetrating glance. "How was *your* summer, Mr. Taylor?"

"You know how it was."

"I know about the time you spent visiting me. That leaves a lot of hours all by your lonesome."

He reflected her stare in baleful silence.

"I get it," she said. "Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies."

There was time for a drink in the departure lounge. Two or three drinks. "God, I feel relieved," Irene said. "Soon the plane, then Montreal, then home."

Taylor stared through a broad window at a succession of airplanes taxiing, taking off. At last he said, "Any last-minute change of heart?"

"I feel the same as I did before we left Montreal."

"Which means you'll be delighted to see Ralph Ness."

"We've never lied about that."

"I wish you both happiness."

Irene took time shifting herself in her chair. "Only tell me if you want to, Steve. Did you find somebody here?"

"In fact, I did. Her name is Flora."

Irene listened to the name, took it on board, felt the balance of her life adjust itself to the new weight. She smiled. "Why don't you stay with her?"

"She wants me to. She's got this cute little girl."

"You're good with children. Why not stay?"

"I've considered it. I suppose I could sell my share of the business to Ralph."

"He's been wanting to buy you out." Irene studied her watch. "Telephone him. He knows we're coming on this flight, he intends to meet the plane. Tell him I'll be arriving alone."

"It's a preposterous thing to do." Taylor took out his wallet and

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searched through it for his telephone charge-card. He got up, breathing hard. "Ralph will think we've all gone crazy."

Taylor direct-dialed the company number, was surprised when Ralph Ness answered the telephone. "No switchboard?" he opened.

His partner laughed. "Rebecca has been taking all kinds of liberties."

"Tell Rebecca she gets paid to answer the phone."

"What's new with Irene?"

"As you know, she's able to get on a plane. Coming home today."

There was a silence on the line. "Did you two patch things up?"

"I wish I could say yes. It was a humanitarian idea, Ralph, sending us away on a second honeymoon. It didn't work."

"Give yourselves a chance, she spent all that time in hospital."

"It isn't in the cards."

"How do you know till you try? Never mind coming back, you aren't needed here," Ness said. "Head in the other direction, try Italy, or Spain."

"I haven't made myself clear, Ralph. Irene is flying home today but not me. I've discovered something here."

"A woman?"

"And her child. I can hardly believe it's me."

"I think it's terrific."

"All I need is some money. How's business?"

"Business is good."

"If you still want to buy me out, we can discuss it. Meanwhile, meet Irene's plane." Taylor recited the flight number and arrival time. "Be good to her, Ralph," he concluded. "She's had a rough summer, sustained mainly by thoughts of you."

Taylor joined a crowd of tourists aboard one of the airport coaches for the ride back in to London. He was in a mood to share their excitement. Things were working out well. No more hospital visiting for a start. Nor would he now be required to slip back into the humiliating role of the failed husband whose wife is in love with the young and handsome business partner. Instead, he would carry on his relationship with Flora Corcoran and little Bonnie. No complications there. Flora liked something in him that Taylor scarcely recognized himself. If she ever ceased to care for him, she would tell him in so many words.

He climbed the narrow stairway and performed his rhythmic rap on the door. He heard Bonnie's footsteps, her shrill summons to her

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mother, the mock-irritable response as Flora came and opened the door.

Taylor displayed his suitcase. "I decided to move back in."

"Where's Irene?"

"Several hundred miles out over the Atlantic."

"You really are daft," Flora said. She put a hand around the back of his neck and brought him inside. "Aren't you afraid of being trapped?"

"I can handle it," Taylor said. "What's for supper?"

The telephone rang in the small hours of the morning. Irene sounded as if she was beyond anger. "You'll have to get over here," she said. "First available flight. You've got to talk to the police, and to lawyers."

"What's happened?"

"Our dear friend and partner, Ralph Ness. He's gone, together with that fat little switchboard bitch, Rebecca."

"Gone?"

"You heard me. He's been arranging it ever since we went away. That's probably why he suggested we go. He's gathered together every dollar of equity he could lay his hands on. The business is stripped clean. I don't understand it, the lawyers will explain. But he flew out this afternoon—to South America, probably."

"I can't believe it."

"The thing to remember," Irene said as if she was teaching him the language, "is *there is no money.*"

When he put down the telephone and lay back beside Flora in the dark, she said, "I got the drift."

"My partner has sold everything. He's taken the money and run away to Brazil with the switchboard girl."

"What's she like?"

"Very pretty. And smart."

Flora switched on the bedside lamp. She propped herself on an elbow, face resting on a fist, eyes looking deep into Taylor's mind. "You're going home, aren't you?"

"She's alone over there. No income, no way of getting on."

"She was supposed to be your partner's responsibility."

When she turned off the light, they lay on their backs, shoulder to shoulder. Taylor was surprised to discover that he felt relieved. He had a lot of contacts in Montreal. Clients would sympathize with his situation, business would come his way, the bank would be pa-

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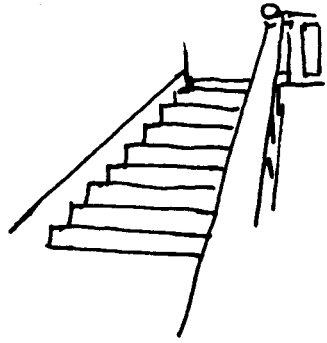
tient. Irene was at her best when the going was tough. Within a year they would be solvent, perhaps on their way to prosperity again.

It had been an interesting summer. While Taylor was in London observing the universal thievery, his partner was making off behind his back with almost everything he owned. The exception was Irene—the one part of his life, he realized now, that could not have been replaced.

Not that he deserved such a break. Taylor rolled over in bed, sweating. They might admire him in Montreal after he picked up the pieces. But here in Chelsea, a good woman would remember him as just another man who grabbed what he wanted and kept on going.



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a *NEW* Mahboob Chaudri story by

JOSH PACHTER

Someone was smuggling spirits out of the Administrative Support Unit in Bahrain, Mahboob told the young ensigns, and the gate he was guarding was the only way on or off the base. "The government will not tolerate crime involving the non-Arab community, and if the smuggling has not been stopped by midnight tomorrow my superiors have been instructed to seal off this gate and allow no one on or off ASU until the situation has been satisfactorily resolved . . ."

A S U

by JOSH PACHTER

"And one more thing," Captain Craft told them. "You're not in San Diego or Norfolk any more. You're going to find out right quick that the folks out here have got some different values from the folks back home. When you were stationed stateside, going off-base on liberty meant you could loosen up and relax for a while. But when you go out on the economy here, you've got to be *twice* as careful as you are on post. The locals are fine people as a rule, but there are things that might be second nature to you and me which are downright offensive to them. That means no drunkenness, no fights, no wisecracks, and *no uniforms*.

"You men: I don't care *how* hot it gets out there, you wear long pants and a shirt at all times unless you're *on* the beach. And you, Miller: no sleeveless tops or low-cut necklines, nothing tight or see-through, and you either wear slacks off-base or keep your hemlines at the knee or lower. These people are more modest than you ever thought was possible and they don't want to have to look at your uncovered skin."

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The captain paused to check his watch. "Well, that about wraps it up," he said, "unless there are any questions?"

The four new men—one of them, Miller, a woman—exchanged tentative glances. It had been a huge amount of information to absorb at one shot and the briefing had lasted only a little more than an hour. The one black sailor in the group half raised his hand.

"Sanders?" the captain recognized him. "Let's go, mister, sing it out."

"Well, sir," the youngster began, "I'm kinda *proud* to be serving here in the U.S. Navy and all that, you know? So I don't understand how come we're not supposed to wear our uniforms when we go off-post—"

"Nobody's asking you to understand it, mister. I'm *ordering* you to remember it, that's all. Do you understand *that?*"

Sanders looked stricken, and Craft realized that perhaps he'd been a bit too hard on him. After all, it was the kid's first day at a brand-new duty station. Maybe he'd better unbend a little, not come across as the complete ogre right off the bat. What was the boy's first name again? Bill? No, that was Garripy, the new postal clerk. Tom, that was it.

"Listen, Tom," he said more gently, "the local government wants us to keep our military presence here in the emirate as low-key as possible. I'm not sure *I* understand it, either. Hell, I'm not sure the Admiral does, or even the Ambassador. But part of the agreement that entitles us to maintain an Administrative Support Unit here in Bahrain, and to dock and fuel our ships out at the Mina Sulman harbor, says we're not supposed to flaunt the fact that we've got seventy-some naval personnel stationed at ASU. And that's why any time you go out that gate and into town the requirement is that you wear your civvies. You with me, son?"

Sanders managed a weak smile. "Yes, sir."

"Very well."

The Miller woman shot up a hand.

This one was going to be trouble, Craft thought. He'd felt sure of it the moment he saw her march down the C-130's boarding ladder out at the airport on Muharraq this morning, strutting her stuff like she owned the damn plane. He was all in favor of equal opportunity and all the rest of it—hell, if a lady service member was willing to go into *combat* with the men, *he* didn't see any reason to stop her—but Miller was going to have to learn that the Middle East was a far cry from the Midwest she'd grown up in, and she was going to

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have to modify her aggressive behavior a tad if she wanted to make it through her tour of duty here without some serious problems. He nodded at her and she jumped into her question just as brash as can be.

"Sir," she said, "I'm a little worried about the possibility of sexual harassment while I'm here. What am I supposed to do if I'm downtown and one of these ragheads starts—"

"Young lady!" the captain roared, and whatever Miller had intended to say died stillborn in her throat. "The piece of cloth our hosts wear on their heads is a *ghutra,* not a rag, and the men who wear *ghutras* are known as Arabs. If I hear the word 'raghead' out of your mouth again, I can assure you you'll be much too busy peeling potatoes for the rest of your stay on this island to have to worry about sexual harassment."

The woman gaped at him, speechless.

"Have I made myself *clear?"* Craft barked.

"You have, sir!"

"Very well. And in answer to your question, Ensign, in the unlikely event you should ever find yourself in a situation where you feel you are being harassed, you get yourself *out* of that situation and report the circumstances either to me or to the XO and let us take care of it. But I'll tell you what, Miller: with your attitude, I don't think you've got much to worry about. Any other questions?"

There were no other questions.

"Very well," said Captain Craft. "I wish you all an enjoyable year in Bahrain. Dismissed."

"Hey, Sanders, wait up," a voice behind him called, and when he turned he saw Miller jogging toward him, a bulky canvas carryall banging her hip with every step. She came up to him breathing hard and put a hand on his shoulder to steady herself as she caught her breath. "You heading into town?"

"Name's Tom," he said, shifting his leather camera bag out of her way. "Yeah, I figured I'd take me a little look around. Captain really chewed you out back there."

"You, too. I guess he doesn't much care for women *or* blacks, huh?"

"He's not so bad, I guess. Just runs a tight ship, that's all. I seen worse. What's *your* name?"

She brushed the question aside. "Miller's fine. Do you mind if I come along with you?"

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"Suit yourself. But I can't go calling you Miller. My stepdaddy's name's Miller. What's your first name?"

"Oh, hell." She shrugged. "It's Dolly. My damn name's Dolly."

The boy smiled. "Dolly. That's a *fine* name. Pleased to meet you, Dolly."

She smiled back at him and they shook hands solemnly.

As they approached the thin wooden railing that separated the base from the outside world, a small man in an unfamiliar olive-green uniform stepped out of the guard shack next to the barrier. "Good afternoon," he greeted them pleasantly. His English was lightly accented and his lively chocolate eyes regarded them with friendly interest.

"Hello, yourself." Sanders returned the smile. "How come they got a Bahraini soldier here on the gate instead of a U.S. Marine or something?" He pronounced the word "BAH-rainy," putting the emphasis on the wrong syllable and missing out on the gutteral *hr* most Westerners had so much trouble with.

"I am Pakistani," the man explained, "not Bahraini—and a police officer, not a soldier. The Bahraini government's Public Security Force supplies the guards for this gate, and most of us on the force come from Pakistan. In other countries, your own men stand the watch?"

"Men and women," Dolly Miller corrected him. "Aren't there any women on your security team?"

"No, I'm afraid we have no women—not in uniform, at any rate. This is an Islamic country and such positions are held only by men."

Miller seemed about to express her opinion of a system which excluded half its population from *any* type of position, but her companion cleared his throat. "We were gonna stroll into town for a while," said Sanders, "look around a bit. Can we go on through?"

"You are new here," the Pakistani deduced. "Welcome to Bahrain. You will find it's rather longer than a stroll from here to Manama, especially in this heat." He nodded at the line of a half dozen red-and-white cabs parked beyond the wooden railing, their drivers—all in flowing *thobes* and checkered *ghutras*—lounging in a circle on the cracked sidewalk, conversing lazily in liquid Arabic. "You will enjoy yourselves much more if you take a taxi. And most certainly you may pass through—today and tomorrow, at any rate. But I will have to ask you to open up your camera bag and your purse for a moment before you go."

"Why's that?" asked Miller. "And what happens after tomorrow?"

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"Someone has been smuggling spirits out of ASU, and this gate is the only way on or off the base. I am supposed to catch the criminal and put a stop to his activities. It is a matter of some urgency, I'm afraid. The government will not tolerate crime involving the non-Arab community, and if the smuggling has not been stopped by midnight tomorrow my superiors have been instructed to seal off this gate and allow no one on or off ASU until the situation has been satisfactorily resolved."

Sanders let out a low-pitched whistle. "That's heavy stuff. You're talking about holding the U.S. Navy *prisoner* here?"

"It is indeed a most serious state of affairs," the policeman agreed soberly. "But I am hoping that I will be able to find out who is smuggling the spirits before my deadline is reached."

"Spirits," Sanders repeated. "You mean liquor."

"The demon rum, I believe you call it. Dark rum, from a lovely tropical paradise some twenty times the size of Bahrain."

"Jamaican rum," said Miller. "And somebody's smuggling it off-base? Why bother? Captain Craft just told us this place is so liberal compared to the rest of the Arab countries you can walk into your neighborhood package store and buy whatever you want."

"So you can. But the prices are quite high—much higher than in your American Class VI store here."

"Still, how much money can a smuggler figure to make?" Tom Sanders asked him. "I mean, our booze is rationed, you know? You can't buy but one bottle of the hard stuff a week. I don't care *how* much you can sell it for outside, you can't make enough of a profit on a bottle a week to make the risk worth taking."

"Ah, but our information is that the smuggler is taking two or three bottles of dark rum away with him per *day*. Or, perhaps"—he made a graceful gesture toward Dolly Miller—"with *her*. But I don't want to hold you back from your excursion, especially since this may be your last opportunity to leave ASU for some time. May I?"

The Pakistani looked quickly but carefully through Sanders' camera case and Miller's shoulder bag, then raised the wooden barrier for them. "Your driver will tell you the ride downtown costs two dinars or perhaps even more," he called after them as Miller pulled open the backdoor of the first vehicle in line. "They always try that, though the rates are fixed for journeys within the Manama area. Don't pay him more than one dinar, whatever he asks."

"Thanks!" the woman called back. "I'm Miller and this here's Sanders! What's *your* name?"

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"Chaudri," the little policeman said. "Mahboob Chaudri. Have a pleasant afternoon!"

Their afternoon was far better than pleasant. It was fascinating. They roamed the twisted alleyways of the *suq* with the eager excitement of adventurous children. This was the first time outside America for both of them and they were determined to soak up as much of the strange Arabic culture as they could. They watched grey-bearded tailors handstitch jet-black *abbas*, sitting crosslegged on the wooden floors of "shops" barely three feet wide and deep. They wandered down streets lined chockablock with gold-merchants and tinsmiths and incense-sellers and dealers in redolent herbs and spices. They passed open-air teahouses whose pale-blue benches were filled with grizzled old men puffing dreamily on tall glass waterpipes. They saw beggarwomen swathed in black on every street corner and heard the babble of a dozen unfamiliar languages everywhere they turned.

It was a day of enchantment until, over milkshakes at the Aradous Coffee Shop, Dolly brought up the thought that had been troubling the back of both their minds. "This thing about the smuggler. You know, if *we* could catch him before that deadline tomorrow night and turn him over to the Captain, I bet that'd go a long way toward making up for the kimshee we got ourselves into this morning."

Sanders looked up from his half empty glass. "Him?" he said, a twinkle in his eye.

"All right." She blushed. "Him or her. Whoever. But what do you think? We could sort of nose around, ask some questions, see what we could dig up. We've still got more than thirty hours before the deadline. What do you think?"

"I think you've gone crazy, Dolly, that's what I think. You think we're in trouble *now*? Well, you just go out there and start playing detective, girl, you're gonna get us both in some *deep* kimshee and that's for sure."

Miller's excited expression sagged. She lowered her head to her straw and sucked on it dismally.

"Hey," said Sanders softly. "Hey, Dolly."

When she looked up she saw him beaming at her. "What the hell," he said. "Let's go for it."

When their cab dropped them back at the ASU gate, there were four Pakistanis lined up on the other side of it waiting to be searched

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so they could leave the base. Although they were all in civilian clothing, it was as if they were uniformed: all four wore tailored long-sleeved shirts and dark pin-striped trousers with widely flared cuffs, all were of medium height and thin, all had dark-brown skin, short black hair, and lively brown eyes, and each one carried a five-liter water jug of red plastic.

It was obvious there was nothing concealed beneath their tight-fitting clothing, but as Sanders and Miller paid off their driver and headed for the gate they saw Mahboob Chaudri unscrew the cap from the first man's jug and pour a thimbleful of its contents into a clear plastic cup.

"Checking for that demon rum?" Miller asked.

"Yes, indeed," the policeman replied. "But as you can see, I am finding nothing but ordinary water." He spilled the sample into the dirt and went on to the second man's jug. "Every non-American working here at ASU is permitted to bring one jug of sweet water home with him each day," he explained. "That is what I think you would call a fringed benefit of their employment. Outside, they would have to pay for sweet water—which is the only water in Bahrain that is pure enough for drinking—but because they work at ASU they may get it here for free."

He recapped the third jug and opened the last one. "This would be the simplest way to move the dark Jamaican rum off the base, which is why you are finding me checking. Without luck, though, I'm afraid. Everything is as it should be." He threw the fourth small sample of water into the dust at his feet, capped the jug, and raised the wooden barrier to let his countrymen out and the two Americans in.

"Well, listen," said Sanders, "it can't be a non-American doing the smuggling, anyway, can it? I mean, liquor's rationed here on base and only Americans have got ration cards."

"Your reasoning is certainly persuasive," Chaudri agreed, "but I must check everyone who goes through this gate. This crime, you see, is not a logical one, and *how* the criminal is smuggling the rum away from ASU is only one of the mysteries I have been instructed to solve. There is a larger puzzle."

The young newcomers leaned toward him.

"Our information is that the dark rum appearing on the market here in Bahrain is definitely coming from ASU," Chaudri told them. "But there *is* no dark rum available at ASU. The only rum sold here, even to the American holders of ration cards, is *light* rum . . ."

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The Class VI store was closed when they went there after leaving Chaudri, a heavy iron gate swung across the pale-green door and padlocked, so Miller and Sanders put off the inquisition they'd been planning and had dinner together instead. They ate at the Two Seas, a cafeteria-style restaurant where Pakistanis did the cooking, bussed the tables, and ran the cash register. There was no mess hall at ASU, so most of the military personnel ate their meals there. The food was good, the prices were low—and it was the only place on post that served food. Which made it the only place where any of them would be eating for an indefinite time, unless the smuggler could be apprehended within the next twenty-eight hours.

Both Miller and Sanders were eager to get started with their investigation, but since checking out the Class VI seemed to be the obvious first step, they separated after dinner with an agreement to meet again in the morning.

In-processing kept them busy for several hours after reveille, but they joined up at 1100 hours and headed for the Class VI. The store turned out to be a smallish room, the walls crowded with shelves of canned goods, snack foods, and such basic items as paper plates, plastic utensils, and ziplock bags for storing leftovers, shaving gear and toothpaste, and a modest array of over-the-counter medications. There was a single deep-freezer packed with an assortment of frozen foods and a cooler for cheeses, lunchmeats, and chilled beverages. An even smaller second room held cases of beer and soda and several well stocked shelves of wine and liquor. In one corner was a towering jumble of empty cardboard boxes and unopened cartons of surplus goods for which there was no display space available.

The clerk was one of the four Pakistanis they had seen leaving the base the afternoon before, and after browsing around for a while and verifying that there was indeed no dark rum being offered for sale they walked to the counter where he stood writing a letter in a strange script that made no sense to either of them. A hand-lettered sign taped to the cash register identified him as Mr. Owais Gujarit, Manager.

"Is that Pakistani you're writing there, Mr. Gujarit?" Dolly asked him.

The man looked up at them and grinned. "It *is* Pakistani, I suppose you could say, but it is not *called* Pakistani. It is called Urdu."

"Urdu," she repeated, tasting the unfamiliar word and finding it somehow pleasing. Then she remembered the task at hand and let

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what she hoped would pass for a look of cool indifference wash across her face as she framed her first question.

"I'll get this one," said Sanders and held up a hand to cut off Miller's protest. "No, you bought dinner last night. Now it's my turn." He ripped open the velcro seal on his wallet and fished out a five-dollar bill.

"One Cornish hen, one *cordon bleu,* two salad, two cola," the young Pakistani behind the register chanted rapidly, keying in prices with a stabbing motion of his right forefinger. "Four dollar sixty, sir," he announced an instant before the total appeared on the machine's digital readout screen in bright blue figures.

Sanders dropped his change in the glass jar next to the register and they carried their trays across the busy dining room to the only remaining empty table.

The room was filled with whispered conversations—most of those Miller and Sanders could hear worried discussions of the government's threat to close the base off from the outside world in only twelve more hours. The two ensigns ate their lunch in silence, chewing over the information they had just received along with their food. Owais Gujarit, the Class VI manager, had been cooperative but hadn't had much of interest to tell them. New stock came into the store once a month, on the same C-130 flight that had delivered Sanders and Miller to the island the day before. Each month's shipment included two cases of light rum, but there had never been any dark rum delivered in all the four years he had worked there.

"The thing's impossible," Sanders complained at last. "There's no dark rum on sale over there in the first place, and even if there *was* there's no way anybody could buy more than a bottle a week—and even if they *could* there's no way to smuggle it out past that man Mahboob on the gate. I tell you, Dolly, it's impossible."

Miller set down her fork. "No, it's not," she said calmly. "I know where the stuff's coming from, I know how it's getting off-base, and I know who's doing the smuggling. What say we step over to the Captain's office and see if he's around?"

But as luck would have it Captain Craft was having lunch with the Admiral aboard the Navy flagship out at Mina Sulman, so, an odd glint in her eye, Miller suggested they stroll down to the gate and share her theory with Mahboob Chaudri instead.

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"Ensign Miller here's solved your case for you," Sanders greeted the Pakistani as he emerged from the guardhouse.

"Has she indeed?" An air-conditioner rumbled loudly inside the shack, but Chaudri's forehead glistened with perspiration. "I am delighted. I have not been pleased about the approach of my deadline. Closing down access to ASU would be making for a very uncomfortable situation here, one I would be very happy to avoid. And although I have been enjoying my time here, I must admit I am ready for a more *active* assignment."

Miller licked her lips nervously. "You mean this isn't your regular job?"

"Oh, dearie me, no. This duty generally falls to a *natoor*—what you, I believe, would call a patrolman. I am a *mahsool*, a detective. I was placed here when we first learned about the smuggling and I will be reassigned as soon as you tell me who I am to arrest, and explain the reasoning behind your accusation."

But a look of agonized embarrassment stole across Dolly Miller's face.

"What's the matter?" Sanders turned to her in concern.

She was hiding behind raised hands now and shaking her head.

"Ah, I think I understand." Chaudri smiled. "I'm afraid Ensign Miller was about to name *me* as the ASU smuggler."

"It's really the most logical solution," he said, pushing steaming cups of tea toward them. They were sitting around a plain deal table in the cramped guardhouse and the air-conditioner's roar almost overwhelmed his comforting voice. "Unless you happened to know that I did not report to ASU until after the smuggling had already begun. Without that one vital piece of information, it must have seemed obvious that I was the only person with access to the base who could leave it without being searched."

Miller lifted her head from her hands. "Thank heaven the Captain was out when we checked his office," she said. "I feel like a big enough fool right now with you two knowing about this."

"What I don't get," said Sanders, "is how you figured Mahboob here was getting his hands on all that rum in the first place if he's stuck up here in this shack all day and he hasn't even got a ration card."

Miller sighed. "I thought he had an accomplice, maybe—somebody who sneaked the stuff to him so he could take it away every evening when the gate closed down for the night and he went off duty."

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"But they've only got *light* rum here on base and it's *dark* rum that keeps turning up outside."

Dolly's eyes lit up. "Well, *that's* the part I was positive I had all scooped out. It came to me while we were eating lunch just now. I was wondering why they call it *cordon bleu* when there isn't any blue in there at all. I thought maybe it starts out sort of blue and changes color while they're cooking it."

"*Cordon bleu* means 'first-rate cook,' " Sanders started to explain.

"Changes color," Mahboob Chaudri repeated slowly. He set down his cup and addressed Dolly. "Excuse me, please, Ensign, but are you saying that—?"

"I'm saying I figured you were taking light rum away from the base and adding some kind of coloring to it to make it look like dark rum later on."

Chaudri washed a hand across his face. "In that case," he said pensively. "In that case." Suddenly he jumped to his feet. "Can you be back here at five o'clock this afternoon? Both of you?"

"Well, sure," said Sanders. "I can. But why?" Dolly nodded.

Chaudri flashed them a brilliant grin. "Because you have earned the right to be present when I expose the *real* ASU smuggler," he said. "Is that reason enough, my friends?"

Miller and Sanders were back at the guardhouse at five sharp. Mahboob Chaudri was waiting for them alone but he refused to explain. "Allah is with those who patiently persevere," he told them with a sparkle in his eye.

A quarter of an hour later, the four Pakistanis they had first seen the day before approached the wooden railing. Once again, each of them carried a red-plastic jug of sweet water. The ensigns recognized two of the men as busboys who worked the luncheon shift at the Two Seas cafeteria. The third man was Owais Gujarit from the Class VI store and the fourth was unknown to them.

As he had done the day before, Chaudri poured a small quantity of the liquid from each jug into a clear plastic tumbler. This time, though, he seemed vastly more confident, and rather than simply looking at his samples, assuming because they were crystal clear they were in fact sweet water, he sniffed at each delicately and tasted them, knowing that one of the four would turn out to be not water, but colorless light rum. And yet, one by one, the four samples proved to possess the no-smell and no-taste of pure water.

"May we go now?" said the fourth man.

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Mahboob Chaudri seemed not to hear him. "Impossible." He shook his head stubbornly. "This is impossible. There is no other way for the rum to be leaving ASU, I would swear it. If the smuggler is not bringing it out in these jugs—"

All at once, the little policeman's querulous expression cleared. "Ah," he sighed. "Ah, dearie me, of course. I'm afraid that I will have to trouble you further," he told the Pakistani civilians. "I must ask you to empty your jugs entirely."

One of the busboys said a word in a language neither of the Americans had heard before. Miller wondered if it might not be Urdu. Chaudri answered him in English, for their benefit. "I want to compare the weight of the empty jugs," he explained. "I want to see if one of them isn't rather heavier than the others. When I am finished, you will have to go back and fill them all over again. I apologize for the inconvenience, but I have had an idea and I must know whether it has any validity."

With shrugs of exasperation, three of the four men uncapped and upended their jugs, spilling the expensive sweet water in the dirt at their feet.

The fourth Pakistani stood there silently, making no move to comply with the *mahsool*'s instruction.

"And you, *sahib?*" Chaudri prompted him.

The man raised his plastic jug slowly, as if preparing to uncap it, and then with a frightened cry he swung it at Chaudri's head, knocking him to the ground, ducked under the wooden railing, and raced off down the dusty road.

Tom Sanders was after him in an instant. Before they had passed the far end of the line of taxis outside the gate, he had brought the man down with a flying tackle. He rolled the prostrate figure onto its back, his fist clenched and ready.

But there was no fight left in the slight man cowering on the ground. Staring up at Sanders with terror in his eyes was Owais Gujarit, the Class VI clerk.

"When he poured the water out of the jug," Dolly Miller explained, "we could hear something still sloshing around in there."

They were in Captain Craft's austere office in the Admin Building, and Mahboob Chaudri—with a cold compress held gingerly to the side of his head—seemed content to allow the Americans to do all the talking.

"The way he worked it was simple," Sanders told his superior.

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"Every afternoon after closing up the shop, he stuffed one of those big plastic baggies into his water jug, leaving the mouth of the baggie sticking out of the mouth of the jug. He filled the baggie with rum, then fastened it shut and filled the jug the rest of the way up with water."

"How was the man covering up all that missing rum?" Captain Craft asked. "And what was he doing with it once he got it off the base?"

"He explained that while we were waiting for the Public Security wagon," Sanders replied. "There was a foul-up in last month's cargo shipment: the C-130 brought in twenty cases of rum for ASU instead of the two we were supposed to get. Gujarit was the only person in a position to spot the mistake, and when he did he hid the extra cases under a pile of other cartons in the back of the shop and started smuggling it out a little at a time. He smashed the empties and got rid of them with the store's daily trash. Outside, he colored and rebottled the rum and pasted on phony labels he had made up at one of the print shops in town."

The Captain swiveled his chair to face Mahboob Chaudri. "We'd better get a medic over here to take a look at that bump of yours."

"Not necessary," the Pakistani protested. "Back in Karachi, where I come from, my family has a long history of hardheadedness. But there *is* one request I would appreciate your granting me."

"Name it, *mahsool*. We're in your debt. I hate to think about the international repercussions if you hadn't managed to clear up this business in time to prevent your government from actually shutting down our base."

"Not in *my* debt," said Chaudri. "Oh, no, indeed not. I would never have solved this case without the invaluable assistance of Ensigns Miller and Sanders, whom I overheard a short while ago hoping that the events of this afternoon might help to raise them a bit in your estimation. I'm not at all sure what they meant by the phrase 'deep kimshee,' Captain, but I would be most grateful if you would lift them out of it, whatever it is."

The room was silent for a moment. Dolly Miller and Tom Sanders looked as if they were wishing they had somewhere to hide.

But Captain Craft surprised them. "Very well," he said with a smile that remained on his face until the meeting was adjourned a few minutes later.

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a *NEW* Scheherezadian tale by

JAMES POWELL

"There is only one Phoenix," insisted the caliph. "Immortal unless slain, it arises anew from its own ashes once every half millenium. Surely to kill it would be a sacrilege . . ."

THE SINGULAR BIRD

by JAMES POWELL

Hear me, my masters. There was once a luxurious caliph of old Bagdad who lived entirely for the pleasures of the table and boasted he had won his place in history by having eaten the flesh of every creature of the land, sea, and sky.

"Except for the Phoenix, sire," his vizier was pleased to remind him.

"There is only one Phoenix," insisted the caliph. "Immortal unless slain, it rises anew from its own ashes once every half millenium. Surely to kill it would be a sacrilege."

"Your piety is admirable, sire," said the vizier, who knew the caliph feared the bad luck which might follow such a deed more than he revered the Almighty. "But one day some godless man will eat the flesh of every creature, Phoenix and all. Then history will forget you. But his name will be remembered until the end of time, for with the one and only Phoenix dead how shall anyone surpass what he has done?"

The caliph chewed his lower lip. He had often been tempted to hand his vizier over to the slow executioner as punishment for his toploftiness. What a fool to be so smart! Still, the man had his uses. On the very day of battle had not the vizier arranged a treaty between Bagdad and Hurik Five Fingers, the fierce one-armed king of the Khazars? The caliph cowered within himself, remembering

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the wild war cry of the advancing Khazar army. His gratitude was tempered by a suspicion that the vizier's foreign adventures had prompted the war in the first place. Still, the caliph had to admit the truth of what he had just been told. Summoning the royal huntsman, he placed in his hands the quiver of gold with its arrows of silver. "The Phoenix or your head," commanded the caliph.

The young huntsman did not fear for his head. There was no creature he could not track, no target his arrow could not hit, and no lair he feared to enter. Within the hour he was riding out through the Great Gate of Bagdad.

He began his quest for the Phoenix by trotting around the walls of the city in ever-widening circles, his eyes intent on the ground. He traveled this way in vaster and vaster circles for several weeks. Then one day in a distant corner of the empire, the huntsman swung out of the saddle to pick up a mellow gold feather with a crimson tip. And there ahead of him was another. He smiled and stuck the feathers in a fold of his turban. Soon his turban was decked 'round with Phoenix feathers.

Yet, as the huntsman followed his quarry he began to note subtle changes in the landscape through which he rode. By the end of the first day, the green pastures had lost their gloss and the nodding flowers seemed strangely overblown. On the second day, his shoulder brushed the trunk of a stunted tree and a squirrel skeleton dropped from the yellowed leaves and sent his horse frisking with fear. Soon the Phoenix feathers were the only touch of color in the drab, ashen countryside. On the afternoon of the third day, the air grew so thick and foul that the huntsman swayed in the saddle and had to stop for rest. When he woke from his fitful nap in the lean shade of a dead tree, he found his horse had broken its tether and lay dead beside a scummy pond.

The huntsman pressed on on foot. The sun was starting its descent when he made out a dark shape on the grey horizon. As he drew nearer, he discovered the source of the desolation through which he had journeyed. Ahead of him stood a venom fig-tree grove. The venom fig oozes a poisonous gum that in ancient times was used to tip arrows of the pagan legions. Of the condemned criminals sent to harvest the gum, only one in a hundred ever returned. The tree's blossoms gave off a cloying fragrance which soon destroyed all living creatures for leagues around. The night liquid that dripped from the leaves of the venom fig could blister a man's skin. Yet the Phoenix

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feathers led into that terrible grove behind whose treetops the sun had started to sink.

The huntsman hurried forward for he was already feverish and unsteady on his feet. He must kill his prey and start back at once or he might never escape this haunt of death. Crouching down, he reached the edge of the grove, being careful with his eyes, for to look too long at the wood of the venom fig meant blindness. Then the huntsman saw the Phoenix.

It was as though all the color stolen from the countryside for leagues around had been hoarded up to make the creature's magnificence. The great bright crimson bird with underparts of rich gold and beak and talons of glittering brass was sitting on a pyre of wood with its wings crossed over its breast as though waiting for something. With trembling fingers, the huntsman strung his bow of horn and plucked an arrow from the quiver. This movement made the Phoenix turn a bright black eye in his direction. As the huntsman raised his bow, a calm pleasant voice spoke inside his head. "Who are you?" it said. "What do you symbolize?"

The huntsman understood at once that he was hearing the voice of the Phoenix. Before his fevered brain could find an answer, the voice spoke again. "I," it said modestly, "am the Hope that springs eternally from Despair. I am the Day Star which rises up each morning out of the ashes of the Night." The voice fell into a waiting silence once more.

The huntsman felt dizzy and his eyes blurred. He needed to keep the bird talking until his arrow steadied enough to find its mark. "I am Death," he said.

The Phoenix laughed tolerantly. "No, you are not my old friend Death," it said. "Who are you? I am that singular bird, the Phoenix. I am the sacred Ho-Ho of the Japanese. The Cathayans call me Fum. My grave becomes my cradle. I am my own father. I am my own only child. Are you one of those poor things who father many but die forever?"

"I have fathered none," said the huntsman in a quavering voice. "My master, the caliph, forbids those in his service to marry until they have served him for twenty years." Here he raised the bow again and felt the feathers of the arrow against his burning cheek.

"Why then, you are as singular as I," said the Phoenix, spreading out its brilliant wings. The huntsman squinted but he could no longer make out his target against the crimson and gold of the sunset. He struggled to focus his eyes. Then the bow dropped from

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his fingers and he fell down in a swoon beneath the largest venom fig tree.

The huntsman was awakened the next morning by a fresh breeze on his cheek. When he opened his eyes, he found himself stretched out on green grass beneath a leafy sycamore, that wholesome tree whose every part is used by doctors to make their nostrums and whose very shade is medicinal. The huntsman did not know how he had gotten so far from the venom fig grove and the blasted landscape around it. Then he saw the Phoenix preening itself nearby.

"Phoenix," uttered the huntsman sadly, "better to have left me to die where I fell. You have saved my life, so now I cannot kill you. Therefore, I must die." Here he explained the caliph's command and his punishment if he failed.

"But could you not slay some other bird and pass it off as me?" asked the Phoenix.

The huntsman shook his head. "My master would not be deceived. Once he has eaten anything, he never forgets its taste. The polka-dot savor of the guinea-fowl flesh he ate ten years ago, the blue glare of last month's peacock breast are as bright on his tongue as if he had dined on them an hour ago."

"I rather imagine," mused the Phoenix, "that an old bird like me would taste like autumn foliage. But how wonderful would be the taste of the young Phoenix which I will soon become. Surely its flesh would be as magnificently fresh as spring flowers! Do you find me vain? May a father not admire his own son? And what a smart little nipper my boy will become, for he will live five hundred years longer than his father."

"Still, you must be very wise," insisted the huntsman eagerly.

"Yes, I suppose I must," agreed the Phoenix.

"Then find me a way to save my life," pleaded the huntsman.

For a moment the Phoenix drummed pinions on his feathered knee. Then he exclaimed, "If I cannot, why then feed me to the caliph, for I would be unworthy to be the father of my magnificent son."

At sunset that same day, the Phoenix, invisible against the evening sky, arrived in Bagdad, carrying the huntsman in his brass talons. They landed on the roof of the young man's house. As the Phoenix instructed, the huntsman rushed at once to the poultry

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merchant's bazaar, for the small drum that orders the shops to shut for the day had already begun to sound.

He bought the largest grey goose he could find and returned home. There he broke out the paint pots, and while the Phoenix posed the huntsman daubed the dead bird's feathers crimson and gold. The Phoenix shook his head as he watched the flat beak and webbed feet being gilded. "It looks no more like me than that paltry imitation you humans do of the glorious scarecrow," he said. "Still, it might deceive, for I am seldom seen, being too rich for the palate of the eye."

Next the huntsman filled a flask with alcohol and another with pitch and hid them inside his garments. Then he saddled a horse and rode off to the postern gate of the caliph's palace. Across his saddle lay the goose, wrapped up in a long green cloak, while the moon shadow of the Phoenix flapped along the street ahead of him.

The caliph and his guests were sitting down to dinner in the garden when the huntsman entered. The caliph expressed disappointment when told the gaudy thing in the huntsman's arms was the fabulous Phoenix. "Sire," suggested the vizier, fingering his gold chain of office, "perhaps it will have a more fabulous taste on the tongue."

The caliph grunted hopefully.

Now the voice of the Phoenix sounded in the huntsman's head. "Hear me," it said. The huntsman glanced around until he saw the shadow shape of the bird high on the garden wall. "Speak the words I tell you," said the voice of the Phoenix.

The huntsman obeyed. "Sire," he told the caliph, "you must take care. Returning here with this bird still magnificent in death across my saddle, I chanced upon a withered and bent old priest of the City of the Sun. When that venerable personage saw the dead Phoenix, he staggered and clasped a hand to his brow. 'O doom!' he groaned. 'O dark days ahead! The paragon of the feathered race is dead. The most wondrous bird of all creation is no more. Surely hope has fled the world. O woe! O woe!' Then the old priest fixed me with a stern eye. 'Beware, Huntsman!' he said, 'and tell your royal master this: It is written that he who eats the flesh of the Phoenix shall before the next sunrise perish like the Phoenix!' And with that, the old man tottered away, shaking his head mournfully."

"By my beard, these dark portents sour the digestion," swore the caliph. He pounded his chest with his fist. "To perish like the Phoenix? Now there's heartburn for you."

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Then spoke the vizier. "Surely, sire, you will not allow the ravings of a pagan priest to prevent you from taking your rightful place in history?"

When the caliph hesitated, the huntsman said, "Sire, order a small portion of the Phoenix cooked and I will eat it. If I have not been incinerated by dawn, then tomorrow you may eat the rest in safety and live forever in human memory."

The caliph chewed his lower lip and scowled at the vizier. "No, Huntsman," he said, "I will not risk so trusted a servant. Besides, I would not deny my vizier the chance to light up his caliph's dawn."

The vizier, who did not believe in portents, made a mocking bow. "As you warm your hands at my embers, sire," he said, "think kindly of one who was pleased to serve you to the very end."

Frowning at the vizier's impertinent tone, the caliph ordered the huntsman to join the dinner guests. Dish after exotic dish was set before them and every wine of the famed vineyards of Taroot. More than an hour passed before the servants brought in the main course. "Drat," said the caliph. "Breast of ilex stuffed with hummingbird tongues again." He looked almost enviously toward the crisp brown wing which was set before the vizier.

When the vizier raised the wing to his lips, the nearby guests sidled away as far as they could in case he should flare up on the first bite. But he did not. In fact, the vizier made much show of eating, smacking his lips, licking his fingers, and exclaiming over the wondrous taste. Through all of this, the caliph stared in such a manner that if looks alone could incinerate, the man would have most certainly burst into flames. Once when a slave brushed against a brazier and singed the hairs on his forearm, the caliph and his guests sniffed the air hopefully and turned toward the vizier. But the meal ended without conflagration.

The guests departed. As the caliph prepared to retire to the harem he said grumpily, "Huntsman, remain here and watch over my vizier until dawn. If he begins to smolder or smoke from the ears, I must be told. I would not miss it for the world."

The night was warm. Somewhere in the garden a nightingale told the darkness of his love for the rose. The vizier took a flagon of wine and a goblet and went to sit under a flowering tree. "Huntsman," he cried, "put off that long face! Come join me in a glass of wine!"

"Gladly, sir," said the huntsman. "But I regret my rash words have brought you to this dangerous point."

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The vizier snorted. "I have no intention of bursting into flames."

"As for that, sir, what is written may or may not come to pass," said the huntsman. "But surely that would be a better way to die than at the hands of the slow executioner."

The vizier had been smiling down into his wine. He looked up with a frown. "Explain your words."

"If you are not incinerated by dawn," said the huntsman, "the caliph will dine on Phoenix. Then his place in history will be secure, for he will truly have eaten the flesh of every creature of the land, sea, and sky. And since the one and only Phoenix is dead, no one else will ever be able to duplicate his feat. No one but you. The caliph must soon come to realize this. I suspect he will not want history to remember him in tandem with his vizier."

Trembling at the truth of these words, the vizier ran his fingertips around his neck as though feeling the garrote. Then he tried to force a purse of gold into the huntsman's hand and cried desperately, "Let me flee for my life!"

But the huntsman refused the gold. "The caliph our master would only say, 'Huntsman, the vizier or your head,' and I would have to track you down."

"Then I am a lost man," said the vizier.

"Perhaps not," said the huntsman.

Ten minutes later, a hasty rider muffled up in a long green cloak left Bagdad through the night gate and galloped away without a backward glance. Meanwhile, at the palace a cry of alarm was rousing the caliph from his bed. He rushed from the harem and out into the smoky garden with an expectant smile on his lips. He found the huntsman standing over a small fire of charred clothing and a bubbling black substance with a vile smell. Touching the smoldering mass with the toe of his slipper, the caliph uncovered the blackened links of the vizier's chain of office.

"Sire," said the huntsman in an amazed voice, "his worship the vizier was telling me in impassioned terms how your excellency's rule has brought peace and prosperity to your people. Then without warning—" the huntsman made a two-handed fist and threw the fingers into the air to illustrate his words "—he burst into flame. It was as if the wind of his rhetoric had whipped the spark of life within him into a sudden, consuming inferno."

The caliph shook his head regretfully. "I would have given much to have witnessed it, Huntsman," he said. "Still, you have served

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me well. Had you not brought the old priest's warning, those most certainly would be the remains of your caliph smoldering there. Ask what reward you will." Before the huntsman could reply, the caliph slapped his hands together in abrupt delight. "But what a pity to let the Phoenix go to waste, eh, Huntsman?" he said with a wink and hurried off, chuckling darkly to himself.

A moment later, the real Phoenix flew down from the garden wall and its voice spoke within the huntsman's head. "My friend, the caliph is up to mischief. For your reward, ask permission to leave his service. Flee Bagdad this very night." Then the bird said, "Now I leave you. I go to meet my old friend Death back in the venom fig-tree grove. I am about to become my own bouncing boy."

The huntsman was pleased that he took the advice of the Phoenix, for the caliph immediately sent emissaries to the court of Hurik Five Fingers, king of the Khazars. Hailing that fierce ruler in flowered words, the delegation proclaimed him a great luminary and a beacon to his people. In the caliph's name, they then presented him with a gift for his table, the fabulous Phoenix, the one and only who was now no more. But when the emissaries opened the box where the bird lay packed in mountain snow, all Hurik Five Fingers saw was a goose with one wing. He thought himself mocked and his brow grew black. Before the sun had set twice, the Khazar army was shouting its fierce war cry beneath the walls of Bagdad.

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a *NEW* short story by

SUZANNE JONES

The hoods had been affixed to the heads of the accused to wear throughout the trial so that they could neither see nor be seen. The muffled voices of their prosecutors must have rolled like distant thunder through the hot and heavy darkness as they sat confused and isolated and sinister to look upon . . .

THE HOODED MAN

by SUZANNE JONES

It was in some town or another in a heavy rain that I had ducked into the doorway of a bookstore and chanced to see displayed there in the window a collection of Civil War photographs, one of which caught my eye. It was a photograph of the hanging of the Lincoln assassination conspirators.

There they were, arranged stiffly and symmetrically before the camera that one last time—and again I noticed the shape of poor Mary Surratt, her long full skirt billowing out above the bonds around her knees, the hood close at her throat which, with her full bosom, gave her body the appearance of a series of comfortable pillows.

Years later I read that the hoods had been affixed to the heads of the accused to wear throughout the trial so that they could neither see nor be seen. The muffled voices of their prosecutors must have rolled like distant thunder through the hot and heavy darkness as they sat confused and isolated and sinister to look upon.

As I watched the shadows of the rain beading on the window pass over the surface of the photographs like tears, I found myself thinking about my grandfather, of whom I hadn't thought in years. I suppose I was remembering him because he was so much a part of

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that childhood which was now as remote as the simple texts concerning the trial of the conspirators.

I must have been eight or nine years old when I first saw that photograph in one of the history books, in the days before educators were overly concerned with the tender psyches of school children and less loathe to expose them to visions of violent death and terrible punishment. I believe it was in the very spring in which I had resolved to kill my grandfather.

Who needed killing.

He was a bully, a liar, a womanizer, a drunk. He had been a jeweler and a gentleman farmer before the Depression and, after, a cop, a watch repairman, and a drunk.

Another picture I remember from that long ago time:

His sitting on the edge of the bed, bloody towel held to his face, waiting for the doctor to come. Beaten and robbed coming out of some bar. My grandmother frightened and disapproving. My mother saying of his injured face, "I hope the doctor doesn't have to prune it. I can't bear the pruning."

We lived with my grandparents, my mother and I. My father was always somewhere else, in some foreign country or another, and so we lived with my grandmother—and my grandfather, too, in between his binges. Which I suppose now were anesthesia for a terminal illness: he must have been sick of his life.

Another picture: Chewing—no, masticating—his food with his mouth open, clicking those horrible teeth. His own had been knocked out in some bar brawl, and his nose smashed so he had to breathe through his mouth even as he ate. I told him he was disgusting. I was six and we were living in a boarding house in Wichita Falls waiting to go to Arabia to join my father. It was a house of large brown rooms with high ceilings. I remember it in sepia, and my grandfather pretending that the chicken on my dinner plate was frog—to try to sicken me.

How I hated him, hated the acrid smell of him: tobacco and gin. Gin was his drink, in clear glass bottles with military shoulders which he turned up defiantly in front of us all. Why bother with a glass when it was his bottle? Only he drank. Then he would disappear for days, then weeks at a time.

Despite her religion, my grandmother divorced him. There was a rumor he had married a woman over in Mineral Wells, but he came back to my grandmother again, I guess while my mother and

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I were in Arabia since my mother said there that her parents had remarried. I remember running out of the house in Ras Tanura and standing in the strip of shade at the side of the house, feeling the heat come at me off the white sand, searing, stifling, just like in Texas, trying to cry, but being choked instead by my anger, it boiling up in my throat, almost suffocating me. And mother finally coming for me.

The spring I resolved to kill him, we had already returned from Arabia. Our tour there was up the previous fall, but my father had taken another overseas job with another oil company, this time in Sumatra, and until we could join him my mother and I had gone to live in Texas with my grandmother and grandfather in a little house in the country my father had them buy for us. My grandparents would live there after we had gone to Sumatra to join my father. But we had that last unhappy spring there together, my mother restless and lonely, my grandmother driven to the edge of sanity by my grandfather's abuse, and me almost comfortable in my hatred of him. Had we planned to stay, I suppose we would have continued just as we were, for although he grew worse as time went on there was a kind of satisfaction in witnessing his deterioration. The binges came more frequently and were of longer duration.

And he was growing deaf.

I think of him now, and I remember his anger. He was always angry, lashing out at whoever was nearest, making someone else share the pain of his despair. Still, if we hadn't had to leave my grandmother I don't think I would have resolved to kill him.

Children have an instinct for suffering and I could smell it on him. He reeked of it as though it were tobacco or gin, or the tired, coppery smell of dried blood. And we were leaving my grandmother alone to wait for him through the long hot hours between midnight and dawn which the crickets measure as rhythmically as the ticks of a clock.

As the time for our departure grew nearer, my grandmother grew thin and the dark circles under her eyes became more pronounced. She took refuge in her Bible. She rocked and prayed, but my mother mostly didn't notice, or pretended not to. My grandmother prayed to keep her sanity. She feared, she said, losing her mind and being unable to care for herself. She rocked and prayed and waited for him to come back. Which he always did.

I never remember seeing him come back. I would come home from school one day and there he'd be: paler, thinner, more alert in a

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beaten animal sort of way, as if he had identified me as one of the hostile elements in his environment.

He was bald and he wore an old felt hat in the last years of his life with the brim snapped low over his face. I seldom saw his eyes, even when he occasionally told stories—like about the time he was on the police force and hunted down the black man who had shot his partner through the stomach. The bullet had snapped his partner's spine and it took him several agonizing days to die. My grandfather said the partner made them all swear to avenge him. I never learned the details of their vengeance since my grandmother always intervened at the crucial point, and in later years I have doubted the veracity of the tale, though it seemed real enough at the time and testified to his dangerous, brutal nature.

Now I look back on him and see him as though he were hounded by the gods, stripped of wealth and position, and driven from one set of dingy rooms to the next, finally dependent on a son-in-law for whom he had only contempt. It doesn't surprise me now that he wanted us to share his pain, but neither does it make it more tolerable.

There was a terrible inevitability to that spring. I knew that once we had gone either my grandmother would begin her slide into madness or she would die at his hands. She was crazy already, he maintained, praying to her god of sweetness and light. I think he also believed in God, but his god was a dark one, given to inflicting suffering on the helpless, heaping sorrow and disillusionment without pity on the heads of the once proud and mighty.

His deafness grew worse. I could mock him almost to his face.

I remember the exact moment I decided to kill him. I had come home from school on the bus, and when I came in the door I could hear my grandmother crying. My mother was at her bridge game, and my grandmother was crying in the middle of the day.

It was very quiet in the house. I could hear the clocks ticking and hear the twang of the spring on the screen door as it slapped shut behind me. Out back somewhere I could hear the sound of running water.

My grandmother's mouth was cut, but not so badly as to cause her to cry. But she gathered me to her and cried as though her heart were breaking.

Now I suppose I would want to know why, I would want to know the provocation and exact circumstances, but then I simply understood that he had hurt her terribly and that when we left her alone

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with him she would die. I sat very still on the edge of the bed while her hot tears wet and wrinkled the waist of the dress she had ironed for me that morning and prayed for the thousandth time the impotent prayer of my childhood: Please let him die. Even then I think I recognized that he wanted to die but was powerless through his own cowardice to free himself.

Suddenly I broke off the prayer. He must die, and I would find a way. My resolve comforted me enormously so that I was able to sit patiently on the edge of the bed for a long time until my grandmother fell asleep, her bruised mouth slightly open.

I changed into my jeans and sneakers and went through the big pasture and the woods down to the creek. The day was still very hot and the air was still. I could smell the trees and the grasses, the dry and dusty smell of things that had learned how to live without much water: the ripe smell of the mesquite with their lacy leaves that gave almost no shade, and the stiff rough scrub-oak trees, and the larger live oak that kept their dry shells of leaves the year round.

It wasn't far to the creek through the woods, but I never told my family when I went there. They would forbid it for no more reason than it lay like a long brown snake in the mud, and in their general fearfulness they would suppose it was dangerous.

It was there I kept my boat, which was my other secret. I had first seen the boat nudging its way erratically along the bank out of the fast part of the current a week or so earlier after the highest water had passed. I had no idea how far and how long it might have drifted, its metal body filling up with the furry kind of yellowish flowers that fell from the willows thickly edging the creek upstream. A frayed rope trailed from its battered aluminum bow.

I had retrieved the boat with some difficulty because of the mud (since the banks had so recently been below the high water), but I was finally able to drag it to safety on a sandy place which had a little stream come through it in the earlier part of the spring. There I cleaned out the debris, and when the water dropped some I had cautiously paddled the boat out across the brown surface of the creek. The paddle I had made for it was awkward and I felt uncertain and anxious in the boat. I kept remembering the story of the five sisters who drowned in Salt Creek on Commencement Day. Their boat had overturned and the muddy water had penetrated their long muslin dresses and dragged them one by one into the depths of the creek. The men who brought them out said they were lying all in a pile on the bottom.

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But that was not at this part of the creek. That had been upstream nearer the town and that had been many, many years ago when young women wore long white dresses.

The creek never seemed sinister to me until I could feel its motion through the thin metal skin of the boat. I knew it was only ten feet or so deep at this point, for late last fall when we had come back from Arabia I had seen it shrunk almost to nothing between the high sandy banks.

I had only taken the boat out that once. I had been frightened by the force of the water, and I didn't know what happened to the creek after it passed below the bridge just down from our house. I supposed it continued on and emptied itself into the Brazos, which was a large river and I knew a dangerous one, especially at this time of year.

After that one time I had pulled the boat up onto the sandy place and cut some bushes I pulled over it. The boat was mine and I didn't want to lose it to some stray hunter or fisherman who might find his way to my place on the creek.

It was a good place, with the narrow sandy inlet flanked by large bushes with pungent leaves and cottonwood trees, which were the largest along this part of the creek. There was little undergrowth at the base of the trees and few snakes to worry about. I was always very careful about the snakes, but since I mostly came in the heat of the day after school when they had withdrawn to cool, dark places, I rarely saw any. Just occasionally the quick swing of a water snake across the creek or a sudden rustle in the brush. But I always carried a stick for the snakes.

I now sat near my boat in the shade of a cottonwood and thought of ways to kill my grandfather. Despite the satisfaction it might bring, I wasn't sure I could lay my hands on a gun. And I didn't feel powerful enough to fatally strike his soft white body with the butcher knife my grandmother used to cut up chicken. Besides, not only did I have no wish to answer for the act, I knew I had to take some care that someone else not be blamed for it. I sensed even then from my brief exposure through books that the operation of justice was imperfect and might fall on anyone as casually as my act would be deliberate.

Considerable thought brought me to the conclusion that his death must appear accidental—so that even if this attempt should fail, I would be able to try again. I thought then of fire since that was not only the most painful way but could easily appear to be an accident. But I couldn't be sure that if I set fire to his bed the whole house

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might not be incinerated. Eventually my eyes rested on my boat, and it was then that I knew in my heart certain sacrifices had to be made. The loss of my boat. The loss of this place forever.

I chewed the sweet stem of a blade of still-green grass and thought of losing this place. I listened to the hum of the insects on the water and the occasional rustle in the bushes and watched the shadows lengthen. Saying goodbye to things was an act I had learned in my short lifetime. I had been in five different schools before I was in the second grade and learned not to trust too much in the permanence of things.

I stood up and began the hot tiresome uphill journey back to the house.

Though I was a little late, my mother had not yet returned. I could see only my grandfather's old truck alone in the drive as I approached the back of the house. My grandfather was sitting and smoking a cigarette in the swing under the live oak tree in the back yard.

"Where've you been?" he asked. I could tell he had been drinking. He shifted his weight in the swing and it complained. One of his pale, sweating arms rested carelessly against the chain which suspended the swing beneath the tree.

"Nowhere," I said.

He squinted at me. "You're too young to be going off all the time in the woods like that. What if a bear was to get you?"

"There aren't any bears in these woods," I said scornfully.

"Well, you're too young anyhow."

"I hate being young," I said fiercely, loud enough so I was sure he heard me.

"So?" He shrugged. "Feelings don't change anything."

"Don't you hate being old?" I asked, suddenly envious of his place in the shade. The sun beat down on my hair.

"Old?" He glared at me. "No, I hate being poor." He brought out the bottle and tipped it up in front of me.

I was glad he was poor. It never occurred to me he included the rest of my family in his judgment. After all, my father was overseas and wore white suits and glittered when he walked.

My grandfather inspected the bottle, holding it up to the sun. "Almost gone. Being poor means when you're done, you're finished, there isn't any more. No money for more of anything."

"I know how to get some," I said slyly.

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"What?" He leaned forward, peering at me from under the rim of that shabby felt hat.

"I found a boat," I said.

"Stole a boat more likely."

"I found it," I insisted. "It came from a long way upstream. From Olney, maybe. It must have busted loose during the high water."

"A boat?" He tipped up the last of the bottle and regarded it regretfully. "Some old rotten planks half full of water."

"No," I insisted. "A fine aluminum boat with hardly any dents in it, and no holes at all." I loved the way the word "aluminum" rolled off my tongue. I was one of few people I knew who could pronounce it properly.

He narrowed his eyes. "How'd you come on it? Your mama told you to stay away from the bridge."

"It isn't at the bridge. It's a long way from the bridge. The creek winds around upstream from there and curves back not too far from here."

I watched his lips move as he tried to make out what I was saying.

I saw my grandmother come to the screen door, wiping her hands on her apron, and watch us for a few moments, but we were too far away for her to hear anything so she disappeared back into the cool of the house.

"It's worth quite a bit of money, I'd guess," I said importantly. "But to take it out we'll have to float it down to the bridge. Then we can put it on the truck and take it into town to sell."

"Got it all figured out, haven't you? 'Ceptin' how to pull it out of the water and drive the truck."

"I figured you'd do something for your half."

"Half?" He laughed shortly. "You're pretty generous seeing as how I'm doing all the work."

"It's my boat," I said stubbornly. "And you'll never find it unless I take you to it. Are you interested or not?"

He rocked a little in the swing and looked off into the woods.

"Dunno. How far is it?"

I shrugged. "Maybe half an hour if you can keep up."

"Watch your mouth," he growled, "or this'll be a very short partnership. You've got a real smart mouth on you, like all the women in this family."

I felt slightly sick. The thought of being teamed with him in anything, however temporary, was almost insupportable.

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The thought of his burning in hell forever, however, comforted me.

He got to his feet slowly and tugged up at his pants. His clothes always looked too big for him, even though he had the softly swelling belly of a drinker, his belt cinched tightly underneath. He stood there a moment, glaring about him in the late afternoon. I knew he was thinking about my mother's coming home and our not being there. I was afraid he was going to wait for her and tell her about the boat and ruin everything.

"Damned hot," he said to himself.

"It isn't far," I urged. "We could be home before supper."

"Back by then, you think?"

"It isn't far, but we'll need another paddle to steer it. I've only got the one."

He ground out the cigarette butt beneath his heel and walked slowly and with deliberation, the way he always did, toward the house. He went inside and after a moment I heard him speak sharply to my grandmother and then reappear with a broom. "You going to use that?" I asked incredulously. "You'll ruin it for sure."

"It'll do," he said.

So after a moment I led the way out the back through the barbed-wire fence into the big pasture. He grunted as he made his way through the wire.

I was becoming nervous as we made our way through the spring grasses already turning stiff and white in the heat. We found the cow path that would eventually take us down to the creek.

"Wait," he called after a time, stopping in the shade of a live oak. He pulled off the awful hat and mopped his head with a dirty handkerchief. The top of his head looked like a skull already, pale and fragile, with veins like worms stretching themselves beneath the skin. I could smell him even from where I stood. Still, as frail as he had become, he was much larger than I. How much more capable would he be than I in the water?

But I swam well. Almost every evening in Arabia while my father was working the P.M. shift, my mother would take me the short walk from our house to the beach on the Persian Gulf, where she would sit with the other women and read and talk and the other children and I would swim. By the end of the tour there, I could swim all the way out to the raft which was anchored where the water was very deep—certainly way over my head. The water there tasted like tears.

I didn't think, on the other hand, that my grandfather could swim.

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He never fished with my grandmother and me or came into the water, though he would sometimes go with us and sit in the shade to catch the cool breeze off the lake and make useless comments and scare away the fish.

I waited as patiently as I could until he pocketed the handkerchief and carefully replaced his hat. He gulped air and made little wet smacking sounds with his mouth. "Let's go then," he said loudly.

I took him through the larger and larger trees and finally down to my place along the edge of Salt Creek.

He said nothing while I pulled the brush away from the boat. I was afraid then that he would find it unworthy and refuse to take it to the bridge. But I needn't have worried. He just leaned on the trunk of the cottonwood while I did the work of freeing the boat from the brush.

"What do you think?" I asked loudly.

He rubbed his mouth. "Should be worth something," he said. He looked uneasily at the water. "Looks fast and deep here," he muttered.

He threw the broom into the bottom of the boat and began to shove the boat over the sand to the water. "You oughtn't come down here by yourself," he said. "Your mama's going to tan you good when she finds out you come down here to the creek all the time."

I was furious and sick at my stomach. He was already looking forward to betraying me.

He stopped pushing since the boat was now halfway into the muddy water. The surface of the creek looked solid enough to walk on, except that every so often a part of the water would suddenly swell and then suck down as though it were alive, and you could tell the current was still strong by the way the bits of dirty foam and leaves and sticks moved steadily past.

"All right," he said, "get in and I'll push it off. But then you got to let me past you to the back so's I can steer. Got it?"

I nodded. I felt as though I were suffocating. The smell of the mud and the smell of my grandfather's sweaty body were overpowering.

I heard a dove flutter its cry in its throat and beat its way into the air behind us. I thought of my grandmother and climbed into the boat and picked up the paddle.

He put his right knee on the bow and balanced himself there for a moment. His hat was pulled low over his eyes so all I could see

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was his chin and the thin line of his disappointed mouth. Then he pushed off strongly with his left leg.

"Okay, now move," he said sharply.

The boat was rocking alarmingly already, tippy with his weight as he crouched unsteadily in the bow, cursing and ducking under the willows and pushing at them with the broom so as to send us out into the middle of the creek, which swelled and humped against the bottom of the boat. I could hear the metal flex noisily.

He stepped awkwardly, sideways like a crab, motioning me irritably toward him. I came, and at the exact moment we were sliding past each other I threw my weight toward him and the boat slipped easily over onto its side. We hung suspended for what seemed a long moment. I remember the exclamation of surprise from my grandfather as he threw up his hands as if to find his balance in the air, and then we hit the water and I felt myself being knocked under as the boat completed its roll.

My ears rang from the blow and unwisely I tried to breathe as I struggled upward. My eyes stung from the grit in the water and I broke the surface coughing and unable to get my breath. I gulped in as much water as air and tried to strike out for the near shore, but my sneakers weighted me down. The creek was filling my clothes with its silt and beginning to pull me under again. I kicked out urgently, trying to propel myself sideways across the current, but the shore was passing away from me, becoming a high smooth bank.

I felt as though I had been struggling forever in the muddy water. As I tried to thrust myself toward the ever-steepening bank, I was pulled under again by a surge in the current and this time barely fought my way to the surface. Through blurry, grimy eyes I could just make out a break in the steep bank ahead as the current carried me along. I knew there would be few ways out of the creek until just below the bridge, and the bridge was far too distant.

I lunged frantically toward the opening in the bank, but the water sucked me down and back. I knew I wasn't going to make it.

Then I felt a hand shove me from behind, almost like a blow, driving me toward the low place in the bank, where I feebly clawed at the vines running down the sides and finally was able to drag myself out of the dirty water to lie choking and gagging while the redness gradually receded from my vision. Before me, filling my whole horizon, were the dirty, stringy stems of the vines. As I blinked the tears from my eyes, I saw a small black beetle making its way around and under the vines and along the muddy bank.

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I rolled over so that I could look back at the water. The sun flashed off the half submerged hull of the boat as it disappeared around a bend in the creek. Nothing else disturbed the smooth brown surface of the water.

As I lay sprawled on the bank, I could hear over the beating of my heart and my ragged breathing the sounds I had always heard at the creek: the suck and slap of the water, the rustles in the brush above and behind me, and now as the shadows had completely covered over the creek the sound of the mourning doves. And sometime after that—a long time, I think—my grandmother calling me.

Men and boys came with steel nets and hooks and dragged the creek from the bridge to half a mile upstream until well into the early hours of the next day before they recovered my grandfather's body. No one in our family ever knew what happened to the boat, and I suppose someone in the search effort must have claimed it for his own. Or maybe it was washed into the Brazos and then out into the Gulf.

Though I was fully recovered by the end of the week, I wasn't made to attend the funeral a few days earlier. Which was surprisingly well attended.

I don't suppose I actively supported the presumption of my grandfather's heroism in the tragedy, but it sprang up and flourished despite my silence, feeding on certain obscure qualities in the character of my grandfather and nourished, I'm certain, by memories culled from a better part of his life than near the end of it. I didn't try to counteract this movement to recover and remember the best of him and ignore the years of pain he had inflicted on our family. It was enough for me that he was gone. Besides, it pleased my grandmother to carry the memory of that one supposedly selfless act of his like a treasure with her to the day she died.

But largely I was silent because I simply didn't know how he had behaved at the end or why.

Did that hand I felt reach out so improbably and shove me to the safety of that muddy shore have purpose behind it, or was it the random flailing of a drowning man?

I sometimes wonder, if it *was* purposeful, whether the force behind that act was one of mere impulse, honor, or ultimate revenge.

"Go on, *live,* you little bastard! You deserve it!"

I'm sure he hadn't the time to reflect on the deliberateness of what

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I had done. He couldn't have been sure of my intention so I don't think he actually said those words.

But he might have in that moment when he sensed his freedom was at hand. He *might* have said them, for why else should they hang so peculiarly in my mind?

But it was a very long time ago for me to remember exactly, and I have found that sometimes the imperfections of memory give a symmetry to the past which, however ironically satisfying, is mostly illusory.

The rain stopped and I took my eyes from the old photographs in the window of the bookstore, straightened the collar of my jacket, and rejoined the people hurrying along the street, adding my own to purposes of varying usefulness.

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a *NEW* Jonas Pickett story by

MICHAEL GILBERT

The smaller children climbed into the cars and the miniature stagecoaches and railway carriages. The older ones jumped onto the painted and gilded horses, tigers, and birds which made up the glamorous menagerie of the carousel. When all were seated, there were still a few places left. The man in charge, casting an eye around, spotted the Admiral.

"Come along, sir," he said. "Only ten pence. Show the youngsters how to do it."

The vacant mount seemed to be asking for a rider. He was a magnificent red, black, and gold cock, crowing defiance out of a lifted beak.

"Why not," said the Admiral. He climbed aboard and swung himself into place.

The owner, slightly alarmed at the success of his salesmanship, said, "You will hold on tight, won't you, sir?"

"I was riding before you were in long clothes," said the Admiral. "Let her rip . . ."

THE ADMIRAL

by MICHAEL GILBERT

"For eleven months in the year," said Admiral Fairlie to Jonas Pickett, who was his solicitor and friend, "Shackleton is as nice a spot as you could find on the South Coast. Plenty of young families on the New Estate. The fathers have their businesses at Saltmouth or Poole, but they prefer to live here because it's quiet."

"And the rates and rents are lower."

"Maybe. Good folk, anyway, who work hard and give no trouble.

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Then there are the old brigade. People like me, who came here to retire. It's not so up-market as Eastbourne, but there's plenty to do."

"One repertory theater, two cinemas, and three Bingo halls, and if everything else fails you can spend your money in the slot machines in the amusement arcade on the pier."

"Right," said the Admiral. "For eleven months, no complaints. Then we come to August, which ought to be the best month in the year. And find that August is—" he paused to pick his words carefully "—a shambles, an inferno, a nightmare."

"Bailey's Circus and Funfair."

"Which isn't a circus at all. Just one carousel, complete with steam organ which makes so much noise that no one can hear themselves speak for a quarter of a mile downwind of it and the rest a shantytown of sideshows, run by a crowd of swindling didicoys, whose brats spend their days shoplifting and their evenings making piddling nuisances of themselves round the streets."

Jonas thought about it. His sympathy was with the Admiral. The Circus did not worry him personally. Being his own master, he arranged to take his holiday in August and departed for Switzerland, a country he preferred when it was empty of skiers and full of wildflowers.

But not everyone was as well placed as he was. He knew that a lot of the older people did suffer.

"Couldn't the Council do something?"

"In the old days, when I was on it, and a few of my friends with me, we would have done. I promise you. Now it's different. The Council's split. People like Colonel Rattray and Saul Melford, they'd be happy to clear Bailey right out, and if Grandfield was still on the Council he'd certainly back them up. Remember the trouble he had with the gypsies last summer. But they're outvoted by the commercial lobby. People like Forbes and Greenaway. What they say is it brings a big crowd into the town, and that means money through the shops and cafes. After all, it's only a month—why not let everyone have a bit of fun? Besides, they say, it's never been proved that the Circus people are the ones who commit these crimes. Which is partly true, even with the shoplifting because the Circus brats lead the town children on—only they're cleverer at it so it's the townees who get caught."

"What about the house-breaking?"

"No proof."

"Difficult," said Jonas. "As long as they abide by the terms of their

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license from the Council, I can't see any legal way of turning them out. All I can suggest is that you and your friends keep your eyes open. Get one or two cases of crime and you might make the Council listen. The police will support you. They hate the Circus. Have a word with Superintendent Queen."

"Jack Queen's a good man," agreed the Admiral. "But he can't do much on his own."

"There is one other way," said Jonas. "Council elections come round next March. Why not get back onto the Council? You'd have no difficulty. Lots of people would be glad to vote for you. You and one or two other people who think like you."

"Ten years ago I might have done," said the Admiral sadly. "I'm an old man now." He paused. "Here's a better idea. Why don't you stand for the Council?"

"Good grief!" said Jonas. "Didn't I tell you that I came to Shackleton for peace and quiet?"

The Admiral's house stood below the eastern end of the front where the concrete of the Esplanade stopped and the chalk and turf of the East Head began. It was a square building set on a ledge in the hillside. From its flat roof, he could, as from his quarterdeck, oversee the town. Bailey's Circus was in plain view, and although it was nearly a mile away the blare of the steam organ came clearly to his ears.

He had a telescope, with a mounting on the roof, through which he used to inspect the shipping in the Channel. Swinging it inland, he picked out the details of the fairground—the parked caravans where the stall holders and their families lived, the stalls which sold a hundred useless trinkets, the carousel dominating the center.

"Like an Eastern market," said the Admiral. "Smelly, noisy, and alive."

He went down to put on the kettle for his tea. For the most part he looked after himself. Mrs. Matcham, the daughter of one of his old petty officers, came each morning to clean the house, cook his lunch, and lay out a cold supper. Breakfast and tea he managed for himself.

"He's no trouble at all," said Mrs. Matcham. "It's my belief he could do it all himself if he chose. But I think he enjoys a gossip. It stands to reason. He's lonely."

After tea, the Admiral armed himself with a walking stick and made his way down into the town, stopping from time to time to talk

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to his numerous friends and to pass on the advice Jonas had given him. All promised to do what they could, but were not hopeful. "Like rats, those gypsies," said Colonel Rattray. "You know they're there, and you know they're up to no good, but you can't catch 'em at it."

Following Nelson's precept, the Admiral decided to close with the enemy. He walked down to the Lammas. When he got there, he found to his surprise that he had to pay to go in.

"Novel idea," he said to the man on the gate, "making us pay for the privilege of being skinned."

The gateman (could it be Mr. Bailey himself?) smiled and said, "You see that, sir?" It was a new perimeter fence, stout mesh, topped by two strands of barbed wire. "We had to do it. No choice. First two or three years we were wide open. A lot of riffraff got in and made trouble. Now we can keep things under control. Better hang onto your ticket. You may have to show it when you go out again."

"I expect you know your business," said the Admiral. He paid twenty pence and went in.

He found every known device to tempt money from the pockets of the unwary. There were gambling machines of all sorts. Machines in which race-cars circled the track and spacecraft circled the moon. There were stalls where you could throw at dartboards and stalls where you could shoot rifles at targets, or at ping-pong balls bouncing on jets of water. It seemed to the Admiral to be harmless and rather childish.

He came finally to the roll-a-disc stall and stopped by it to examine the technique of what was clearly a popular pastime.

For ten pence you purchased eight metal discs roughly the size of an old-fashioned penny. These you rolled down a slotted piece of wood onto a board which was divided into spaces, each of them a little, but not much, larger than the disc itself. If you succeeded in landing your disc fairly in a square, not touching any of its edges, you received back five, ten, or twenty pence according to the number marked on the square.

The Admiral, who had been something of a mathematician in his youth, had just calculated that the chances against landing a disc of that size clearly inside a smallish square were roughly thirty to one when he became aware that a disturbance was taking place on the far side of the stall. A young man with a very red face was saying, "You scooped up my disc with the others but it was in a square marked 'ten.' Why aren't I getting paid for it, eh?"

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"Touching the line, I'm afraid, sir," said the man in charge of the stall.

The Admiral switched his attention to him. Thick-set, black haired, brown faced, sure of himself.

"It bloody wasn't touching any bloody line. It was smack in the middle."

The stall holder jerked a thumb at the notice that hung above the table. "In any doubt or dispute, the decision of the proprietor is final."

"It's a bloody swindle," said the young man.

"Other people waiting to play."

"If they want to be swindled."

"Come away, Jack," said the girl who was with him. "It's not worth arguing." She pulled him by the arm. He went reluctantly. His place in front of the board was immediately filled. There seemed to be no lack of people willing to lose their money playing against odds that would have shamed the authorities at Monte Carlo.

The Admiral edged away and made for the carousel. He was thankful that he was a little deaf. The great whirling machine was slowing to a halt. Some of the riders dismounted and there was a rush of children to take their places. The smaller ones climbed into the cars and the miniature stagecoaches and railway carriages. The older ones jumped onto the painted and gilded horses, tigers, and birds which made up the glamorous menagerie of the carousel. When all were seated, there were still a few places left. The man in charge, casting an eye around, spotted the Admiral.

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The owner, slightly alarmed at the success of his salesmanship, said, "You will hold on tight, won't you, sir?"

"I was riding before you were in long clothes," said the Admiral. "Let her rip."

It was a curiously enjoyable sensation. He treated himself to two more rides. The pair of horses in front of him were occupied by two boys, dressed identically in jeans and blue sweatshirts. A cut above the other children, he thought. They had both looked back once at

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the Admiral mounted on his fiery rooster, and then at each other, but neither of them had smiled. Serious types, evidently.

His ride finished, the Admiral climbed down, feeling a bit stiff, and decided to walk it off by circling the encampment and inspecting everything. Some of the stalls were interesting but most of them were gimcrack. He bought a china ashtray in the shape of an oyster shell for Mrs. Matcham.

It was getting on for suppertime by now and the crowd was diminishing. No doubt it would thicken up later. One of the many complaints the police had against the fair was that it was allowed to function until midnight. This meant that drinkers who had been turned out of the pubs at eleven usually made for the fairground for a final fling.

An inferno it must be, thought the Admiral.

His perambulation had brought him to the far end of the compound. It was at that moment that he heard the sound of running feet. It was the boys he had seen on the carousel and they were going fast.

The first one threw himself at the wire-mesh fence, wriggled under the bottom strand of the barbed wire, and landed on the other side. The second was not so lucky. The barbed wire caught in the belt of his jeans and held him firm.

The Admiral could now see his pursuer. It was the roll-a-disc stall holder. He was red in the face and he had a hedge stake in his hand, a dangerous-looking weapon.

Seeing the boys at his mercy, he checked for a moment, took careful aim, and brought the stake down hard on the curved bottom. The boy made no sound, but jerked like a gaffed fish. The stake descended again.

The Admiral said, "That's enough. If you hit him again with a weapon like that you'll do some real damage."

"I'll hit him as much as I want, the little bastard."

"No, you won't," said the Admiral.

There was a note in his voice which made the man hesitate.

"Because I happen to have some influence with the Watch Committee. If you hit the boy once more, I can promise you that you won't see Shackleton again. More likely you'll see the inside of a police station."

The boys had taken advantage of the interruption. The first boy, turning back, had managed to free number two from the barbed wire. He wriggled clear and both of them took to their heels.

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"Right," said the man sourly. "Now he's got away with it."

"Got away with what?"

"Got away with not paying. They get in through holes in the fence. They can't go out of the gate because they'd be asked to show their tickets, so they try to get out the way they got in. I saw the little buggers sneaking off and I guessed what they were up to."

"Then by letting them get away with it I have lost the fair forty pence. I'll pay for them." He produced the money.

"It isn't the money, it's the principle," said the man. Nonetheless he pocketed the coins. "They get away with it. Others copy them."

"No doubt," said the Admiral. He took the stick from the man and examined it. "That's much too heavy to hit a boy with. An inch or two higher up and you could easily have broken his back."

"Next time maybe I will," said the man.

"A real brute," said the Admiral, when he met Jonas in the town on the following afternoon. "If I hadn't stopped him I really think he might have killed that boy. Maimed him, anyway."

"You realize that if he had," said Jonas, "you would probably have been able to clear them all out."

"Thank God I'm not a cold-blooded solicitor," said the Admiral indignantly. "Did you really think I was going to stand by—"

"I didn't think it for a moment. I hope I'd have done the same. Did you hear what happened last night?"

"I heard a lot of shouting."

"There was a stand-up fight. Some of the men from the engineering works and the Circus people. Quite a few casualties, Queen told me. Including one of his own men."

"The Watch Committee aren't going to like that."

"One good thing came of it. They've agreed to shut the place at eleven o'clock. Which ought to keep things a bit quieter."

"I can tell you something else that will quieten them," said the Admiral. "It's going to rain. And rain hard. Not today, perhaps, but certainly tomorrow."

"By the way, I hope you enjoyed your ride."

"Oh, you heard about that, did you?"

"Talk of the town."

As he walked back to his office, Jonas was thinking about the Admiral. He had heard about his ride on the carousel from Mrs. Rattray who had come to see him about one of her periodical rows

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with the Vicar. "He can get away with it," she said. "Everyone likes him. He ought to be made Mayor. Permanently."

Jonas agreed. He had looked up the old man's record, starting when he was a young sub-lieutenant in the First World War.

When he got to his office, he telephoned Superintendent Queen, who said, "You heard about it, did you? One more show like that and even the old women on our Council might do something."

"I've had an idea," said Jonas. He passed on what the Admiral had told him. "Why don't you find out the name of that stall keeper and pass it up to Records?"

"You mean he might have some form," said Queen thoughtfully. "It's an idea."

During the late afternoon, when some of the heat was out of the day, the Admiral liked to take a walk up the cliff path in the direction of Hove. It was not a good path and few people ventured up it even in summer. It was intersected by steep clefts, each of which involved a slither in and a scramble out. It was at the bottom of one of these that he checked. He smelled something. No question about it. It was the smell of cooking and it came from the far end of the cleft where it turned a sharp corner.

The Admiral advanced cautiously, picking his way over the boulders. The cleft turned twice, getting narrower at each turn, until it ended in a sort of cave. A fire of driftwood was burning brightly in the mouth of the cave. Suspended over the fire from a tripod of iron rods was a large, new-looking saucepan. One of the ingredients in it, if the Admiral was able to trust his nose, was onions.

Two figures moved at the back of the cave. The Admiral felt no surprise when he recognized them. He had felt that he would run into the boys again somewhere. As they came out into the light, he could see that they were twins. Not identical twins. One was darker and had a more sharply cut face. The other was fairer and rounder, but the resemblance was marked. He guessed they were about eleven or twelve.

The dark one said, "That was a bit of luck, sir, meeting you. I didn't know who you were but I'm glad to be able to thank you. I didn't feel like stopping yesterday."

"I don't blame you," said the Admiral. "We'd better introduce ourselves properly. My name's Fairlie."

The boy indicated his twin and said with old-fashioned gravity, "David Bourdon. I'm Colin."

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"Borden? Like Lizzie?"

The boys looked blank.

"Lizzie Borden took an axe," said the Admiral. "Hit her mother forty whacks."

"She sounds quite a girl," said Colin. "But no relation that I know of. We spell ours B-O-U-R-D-O-N."

The name meant something to the Admiral, but he couldn't place it. He said, "Have you come to live in Shackleton?"

"Just visits. We're here for the summer holidays. A lady looks after us. She's called Mrs. Garibaldi. She's a widow."

"We did wonder at first," said David slowly, "if her father might have been the man who liberated Italy."

"I think," said the Admiral, "that it's unlikely." Then he saw that they were laughing at him. He said, "If she's looking after you, I guess she has her hands full."

"We don't give her any trouble," said Colin. "She gets us our breakfast and a meal when we get back in the evening. We've been given money to buy our lunches and teas."

"So instead of buying them you cook your own and save the money. What is it, by the way, apart from onions?"

"It's a young rabbit. We snare them up on the downs. Once we baked a hedgehog in clay. It tasted most peculiar." Colin took a spoon and stirred the contents of the pot. "It's nearly done. There's enough for three."

"It's kind of you," said the Admiral hastily, "but I've just had my tea. Do I gather your parents have dumped you down here for the holidays?"

"We haven't exactly been dumped," said Colin. "Dad's very busy. And Mummy—isn't."

Oddly enough, the Admiral understood exactly what Colin meant. But he didn't feel they knew each other well enough for him to pursue it at the moment.

He said, "Having saved the money intended for your daily sustenance, you spend it at the fun fair. Saving even more by not troubling to pay your entrance fee."

"Only dopes pay," said David. "The very first day we were here the kids showed us half a dozen ways of getting in. And out again. The trouble yesterday was we were in too much of a hurry, with that bloke after us, to look for the right spot. We've had trouble with him before."

"You certainly had trouble this time."

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"Wham," said David. "You ought to see the marks. They're black-and-blue and turning yellow at the edges already."

"It was ten times worse than any whacking at school," said Colin. "I thought he was going to break me in two. If you hadn't been there, I believe he would have done."

"When you say you've had trouble with him before—?"

"Oh, he was cheating with that roll-a-disc thing and we told him what we thought of him. He couldn't get out at us that time because he was stuck behind the stalls. But he was pretty angry."

"They all cheat," said David.

"How in particular?"

"Well, there's the shooting gallery," said Colin. "That's a thing a lot of people go for. It's a complete swizz. To start with, the rifles are sighted all wrong. The one I had shot high and to the right. I found that out by doing a group. Then I aimed low and left and I thought I'd done a jolly good target. When the man brought it back, he said, 'Hard luck—try again.' Then he explained that shots only counted if they went right into the bull. Right in. You didn't score by cutting the edge of it. That's nonsense."

"You've done a lot of target-shooting?"

"He's jolly good," said David. "He's in the school eight, and last term—"

"Mr. Fairlie doesn't want to know about that," said Colin severely. "Give the rabbit a stir. The darts are just as bad. If you do happen to get one in the fifty, they've a way of shaking the backboard so it falls off. They say, 'Throw a little harder, son, then maybe it'll stick in,' and grin all over their silly faces."

The Admiral, who had been examining the sky, said, "I can tell you one thing. You're not going to be very comfortable here tomorrow."

"Why's that?"

"You've had the best of the weather. We're in for a good old South Coast dowsing. You can always tell when those mare's-tail clouds start driving up the Channel on the wind. It doesn't last long, but it's a shower bath when it arrives. Would you like to come and have tea with me? I can't promise you hedgehog or rabbit, but there could be poached eggs."

The boys looked at each other. Colin, who was clearly the one who took the lead, said, "We'd like to do that, sir. Could you tell us where—"

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"It's the first house as you come down this path towards the town. You can't miss it. Let's say half past four."

At ten o'clock next day, the rain clouds drove in solidly, bank upon bank, from the southwest. In a matter of minutes the seaward face of Shackleton was changed. The beach parties fled, the stall holders put up their shutters, the ice-cream vendors pedaled away, colored umbrellas came down, deckchairs were stacked, pleasure boats were stripped of their cushions and oars and turned keel uppermost.

The Admiral saw it from his upstairs window and chuckled. It wouldn't last long, but it was a welcome catharsis. Like hosing-down after coaling.

His visitors arrived punctually at half past four in dripping blue raincoats, with their hair plastered down on their heads. They seemed to be in excellent spirits. During tea, they devoted themselves to the business of eating. The Admiral did most of the talking. He explained to them what the authorities thought about the fair, the chances of getting rid of it, and the difficulties in the way of doing so.

His audience seemed to be listening but were so busy with poached eggs and anchovy toast that it was difficult to be sure.

When almost everything in sight had been eaten and Mrs. Matcham had cleared away the plates and cups, the Admiral's guests showed no inclination to leave. They removed themselves heavily from the table and sank down onto the sofa.

Colin said, "We know now. You're not a mister."

"True."

"You're an Admiral."

"Long retired."

"You fought in the war against the Kaiser."

"One of my neighbors has been talking."

"Not a neighbor. Dad rings us up every evening to see how we're getting on. We asked him about you."

"It was a terrifically long call," said David. "It must have cost pounds."

"I expect the Admiralty paid," said Colin.

"Good Lord," said the Admiral, "I have been stupid. The penny's only just dropped. Your father's Sir David Bourdon, the First Sea Lord."

"That's right," said David.

"A month ago he jolly nearly wasn't," said Colin.

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The Admiral knew now why the name had rung a bell. It had been in all the papers. Not the details, but the outlines of the story as ferreted out by the defense correspondents. The government had proposed to add to the apparent strength of a diminished Navy by reconditioning two obsolete aircraft carriers. The First Lord had insisted that they spend their money—admittedly a much larger sum of money and one which had been earmarked for welfare projects—on the latest types of nuclear submarine. He had not only insisted. He had made it clear that he was prepared to put his own head on the block. The government had given way.

The Admiral remembered something else. A few years ago Lady Bourdon had been killed in a flying accident. That was what Colin had meant when he said, "Mummy isn't." David said, "One thing Dad told us about. Is it right about what you did in the war? Q ships and all that?"

"Yes."

"He said you'd tell us about it."

"It's all in the books."

"We haven't read the books."

"I suppose most books nowadays are about the last war. Or the next war."

"Or the war in the stars."

"I think science fiction's boring," said Colin. "I like reading about real wars. Things that actually happened."

"All right," said the Admiral. "It was like this. We fitted out a few merchant ships to look like real old tramps. Mostly they flew Dutch or Norwegian flags. It made no difference. In 1917 the U-boats were sinking everything they set eyes on. We had guns on board, quick-firers and even heavier stuff, but it was all hidden."

"How?" said Colin.

"The usual cover was a collapsible deckhouse made of canvas. You pulled a rope and it all fell apart. But you had to convince the submarine that you were abandoning ship. That was called a panic-party. Dutch skippers did sometimes take their wives along with them, so one of the men would dress up as an old Dutch frau to come on deck with the men and wring her hands and bellow. There was a lot of competition for that part.

"I bet," said David.

"Then everyone, or apparently everyone, climbed down into the boats. The submarine would have surfaced by this time and be watching. The idea was that they didn't like taking neutral lives.

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Bad for world opinion. They simply wanted to sink the ships, because the more tonnage they destroyed the better. As soon as the boats were clear of the ship, they got ready to put a torpedo through her."

"And then," said Colin, "whoosh. Down came the phony deckhouse. Bang-bang-bang. Goodbye, submarine. What a super idea. How you must have laughed."

"Right at the beginning," said the Admiral, "almost the first time out, before the Germans got suspicious, it was even funnier than that. The submarine came right alongside. I think the commander wanted to assure the Dutch captain personally that no harm was intended to him or his crew, they would all be allowed to get safely away in their boats before the ship was sunk. Whilst they were parleying, the wife came on deck screaming and crying with a baby in her arms. She rushed over to the rail and tossed the baby clean down the conning tower of the U-boat."

The boys stared at him wide-eyed. "The baby was a bomb with a very short time-fuse," said the Admiral. "But those were early days. Afterwards, the U-boats got a lot more cautious and stood well away. Then it wasn't always such fun."

He told them about other engagements, in some of which he himself had been involved. Outside, the rain poured down in a steady stream. The Admiral said, "Heavens, it's past six. Mrs. Garibaldi will think you've been drowned."

The boys got up reluctantly from the sofa. The Admiral said, "Look, if you're bored, or it's too wet or cold outside for sitting around, you can use this place. If I'm not here, the back-door key's under a tile in the outhouse. I'll show you where."

When they were going, they both said "Thank you" politely and marched off into the rain.

I hope I didn't bore them, thought the Admiral. They certainly hadn't bored him. He realized more strongly than ever before what he had lost by having no grandchildren. Both his sons had been killed in the last war. His only daughter had married an ambitious politician who had been too busy in all-night sittings in the House to waste his time presenting her with children.

There was refreshment in children. Even his most cynical married friends admitted it. Children might be a nuisance when they were small and a problem in their teens, but there was a period between six and twelve when they were an unmixed delight. They had a sort of innocence. They might do wrong out of thoughtlessness but they

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would not plan it. Nor would they think wrong of anyone until he had proved himself a brute.

The boys he had been talking to had something more. Some of the spirit of their mother who, the Admiral recollected, had been French, and more than a little of the toughness and initiative which had taken their father to the top of his profession. These were the sort of youngsters into whose hands the governance of the country would fall when the last of the present generation had passed on.

It was going to be a perilously difficult world as one after another the old bastions went down—religion, family life, the rule of law. Stormy seas which were going to need clear heads to chart the course and strong hands on the tiller.

The Admiral woke with a start from a daydream which had nearly turned into a nightmare. He stumped off to see what Mrs. Matcham had put out for his supper.

All next day, which was a Thursday, the rain bucketed down. On Thursday night, the wind swung round to the south and by lunch-time on Friday the sun was shining strongly as though to make up for its previous lapse. The holiday makers, especially the ones who were due to go home that weekend, crowded back onto the beaches and the housewives made a concerted rush for the shops to lay in stores for the weekend.

Next morning, after breakfast, the Admiral walked down to pass on to Jonas the latest news from the Council. He said, "They had a meeting yesterday afternoon. It was a close thing. They couldn't bring themselves to turning out the whole show, which was what Rattray proposed. Someone pointed out that if they did, they'd have to refund at least part of the license fee which had been paid, and all the money men looked glum. The furthest they would go was to say they'd consider the matter again next year."

At this moment the telephone rang. Jonas listened for a moment, said, "Yes, he's here with me," and to the Admiral, "It's Queen. He wants to talk to you."

The talk was one-sided. The Admiral said nothing but "I see" and "Yes." As he replaced the receiver he said, "It's trouble—at the Council offices. He wants me to come along and pour a little oil on troubled waters."

"What's up? A riot?"

"Something of the sort. Are you coming?"

"Try and stop me," said Jonas . . .

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The streets were empty, but they could hear the swelling noise ahead of them.

"It's the families from the New Estate. It seems the wives went shopping yesterday afternoon and a lot of them left their doors on the latch. A silly thing to do, but they'd never had any trouble before and didn't bother about locking up. When they got back, they found someone had been through the unlocked houses and taken a lot of stuff. And they reckon they know where the thief came from. They're really worked up about it. Had a meeting when the men got home last night and decided that if no one would deal with the Circus they'd attend to it themselves."

"Attend to it?"

"Bust it up."

"Mob law. We can't have that. What are they doing?"

"They marched down to the Council office and demanded to see the Town Clerk."

"Little Mr. Timms. He'll be scared stiff."

"He was. But he managed to get the front door shut and telephoned the police."

"So what are the crowd doing now?"

"Milling round in the street and shouting. They'll be breaking windows soon. Queen got in the back way, with two or three members of the Watch Committee he'd collected enroute. They're in the Council Chamber, in a state of siege."

They had reached the main street by now. It was jam-packed with people and the blast of horns from blocked motorists was adding to the general pandemonium. Jonas had had some experience of mobs. He thought this one sounded angry—not really dangerous yet, but the first broken window would fire the fuse. The leaders were milling round the main door. A big red-haired policeman stood stolidly outside it.

A lot of the people were not really involved. They had come along to see the fun. Jonas and the Admiral pushed through them without much difficulty and reached the front of the building. Positioning himself on the top step, the Admiral bellowed in his quarterdeck voice, "Listen to me a moment. Stop shouting and listen."

Jonas thought he was the only person who could have made them listen. The hubbub died down a bit.

"There's no point in trying to fight the police or break down the door. What you need is a deputation. You've got a grievance. Right. They'll have to listen to you. Half a dozen of you."

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"Preston and Collinson," suggested Jonas quickly. They both happened to be his clients.

"And Mrs. Garibaldi," said the Admiral. "You'll come? Right. We need three more volunteers."

The idea of a deputation was gaining ground. The Admiral said to the policeman, "Let this lot in, Davey, quick, then shut the door behind us."

They found Superintendent Queen in the front hall with two more policemen. The Admiral explained his plan. Queen said, "Good idea. I'll take you all up."

In the Council Chamber, three members of the Watch Committee were forming a protective phalanx round poor Mr. Timms, who looked as though he was about to burst into tears.

"Why don't we all sit down," said Queen, "then we can talk things out."

The Admiral said, "I hope one thing's clear. We can't have violence. It won't do you any sort of good."

"It won't do them Circus bastards any good, either," said Mr. Baker, a large and aggressive engineer. But it seemed that he was in a minority. Tempers were cooling.

"What we've got to do," said Queen, "is get the fullest and most accurate description of the things that have been taken. Mr. Timms will write it all down. Suppose you start, Mrs. Garibaldi."

Mrs. Garibaldi had lost a silver teapot which had been given to her by her late husband on the twenty-fifth anniversary of their wedding and a pair of small silver candlesticks. She described them in loving detail. Her next door neighbor, Mrs. Preston, had lost two athletic cups won by her son at school. None of the losses seemed very serious but Jonas knew exactly how the people felt about them. It was not the value of the goods, but the fact of the intrusion. To have alien fingers dabbling among their private possessions was a form of rape.

When the list was complete, the Superintendent said, "You've most of you been to the Funfair and you've seen the people who run it and I expect you'd recognize them if you saw them again. Now think hard. Did you see any of them near your houses yesterday afternoon?"

There was a general shaking of heads.

"It's like this," said Mrs. Preston. "As soon as the sun came out, we all went down to the town to do our weekend shopping and the kids made straight for the beach."

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"Most of the afternoon," agreed Mrs. Garibaldi, "I don't suppose there wasn't anyone around in the Estate at all."

"Did any of you meet anyone on the road going out or coming back?"

Heads were shaken again.

"You see how difficult that makes it for us. But what we can do and will do is circulate the descriptions you've given us as widely as possible. The teapot and the cups had engraving on them. They won't be easy to pass . . ."

There was more discussion, but the steam was out of the meeting. Looking out of the window at the end of the hall, Jonas could see that most of the crowd had drifted away and the police had the traffic moving again.

Jonas congratulated Queen on his handling of the affair.

Queen said, "I did think it was going to be nasty, but they're reasonable folk really. Incidentally, I've got onto that stall keeper. His name's Golding. He's got a wife who's as big a brute as he is by all account. And he has got a bit of form."

"Theft?"

"Assault with intent to injure. He nearly killed a man in a pub at Sidmouth. Some argument about money. He collected three months for that, and would have got more only it was partly the other man's fault."

"I knew he was an ugly customer," said the Admiral.

The twins, who had been watching the Admiral's house, had seen him leave when he went to visit Jonas. They waited for a few minutes and then made their way round to the back, found the doorkey under the tile, and entered quickly. They knew that Mrs. Matcham had the day off on Saturday.

"No hurry," said Colin, "we've bags of time."

David said, "It's all right if he does come back. He said we could come here whenever we wanted, didn't he?"

Colin looked at his twin thoughtfully. Then he said, "Yes, that's all right. Let's go in."

They made their way upstairs. When not in use, the telescope lived in a cupboard in the attic. They took it out, carried it onto the flat roof, and fixed in on the permanent housing which stood there.

"Be jolly careful," said Colin. "If you look at the sun through it, it could blind you."

"Stale," said David.

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They positioned the telescope so that it was focused on the Funfair. Then they fetched two stools from the attic, sat down behind the telescope, and took it in turns to watch. The one who wasn't watching had a notebook and a pencil.

Colin said, "If he comes back, remember that we're bird-watching. Write some birds' names in the book."

"What birds?"

"Any birds," said Colin impatiently, and resumed his inspection of the Funfair. He was concentrating on the side where the stall holders' caravans were parked and their families lived.

If the Admiral had been watching them he would have seen no reason to doubt their toughness and initiative. He might have qualified his thoughts about their innocence.

Half an hour later, David said, "Got it. It's the blue one, quite a bit separate from the others. It's got a box of geraniums on the windowledge."

"You're sure?"

"Certain. I saw him go in and come out again. And his wife came out. That's the one all right."

Colin said, "Good." They packed up the telescope, put it back in the cupboard, returned the stools to the attic, and departed as unobtrusively as they had come.

That afternoon, having nothing better to do, the Admiral again made his way down to the fairground to see if he could pick up anything which might help the wobblers on the Council to make up their minds. Nine-tenths of the way there, he thought. One more good push.

Being Saturday, the place was crowded and there was a small queue filtering through the entrance. Immediately in front of him was a girl pushing a pram with a baby in it. Rather a slatternly looking girl with a lot of makeup on her face. The baby was invisible under a pile of bedclothes. Poor mite must be suffocating, thought the Admiral, and wondered if he should say something about it, but decided that a mother, even as young as this one, probably knew what was best for her own baby.

There were quite a few policemen about, he noticed. The stall holders looked a bit edgy, but the crowd seemed reasonably good-tempered.

Golding was busy at his roll-a-disc stall, which had the usual crowd round it. The Admiral watched for a bit and thought that he

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seemed more generous in his paying-out than he had been before. Maybe he sensed the hostility of his customers. A clever brute, thought the Admiral. In a long and active life he had met many brutes, but few of them had been clever.

A woman arrived, pushing her way through the crowd round the stall, carrying a thermos of some hot drink. She ducked under the board and took charge of the game whilst her husband refreshed himself. A big woman with a rasping voice, she had no difficulty in keeping the game going. A fitting mate for the brute, thought the Admiral.

It was at that moment that he had one of the severest shocks he could remember.

He happened to be looking back at his own house, clearly in sight, perched halfway up the cliff, and as he was looking he saw a flash of light. Someone on the roof was using a mirror, slanting it into the strong sun and then turning it away again. A primitive but effective form of heliograph. The message was clear, too. The Admiral had not forgotten his Morse code.

"OK," said the mirror and then again, "OK—OK—OK."

"What on earth," said the Admiral. "This wants looking into."

He made quickly for the exit. It took him some time to get through the crowd that was coming in.

The stout man in the singlet (surely it was Mr. Bailey) recognized him and waved to him genially.

"Going already, Admiral?" he said. "Not spent all your money, have you?"

"Not quite," said the Admiral shortly. He noticed another dissatisfied customer just ahead of him. The girl with the pram was leaving, too.

Back at his house, the mystery deepened. The key was under the tile. There was no sign of breaking in. There was no sort of disturbance and if someone had been up on the roof they had left no mark. The telescope, which was one of the most valuable things in the house, was safely stowed in the attic cupboard. The Admiral made his way slowly down through the house, checking as he went. His orderly habits enabled him to say with certainty that nothing was missing.

Could the whole thing have been his imagination?

He was prepared to believe that a flash of sunlight might have deceived him, but regular flashes spelling out a message? Was he

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becoming like one of those people who saw unidentified flying objects? There had been a story in the papers about a market-gardener at Wrexham who had not only seen one hovering above his garden but had read a message flashed from one of its portholes. Oddly enough, it had been in morse code, too.

The Admiral shook his head angrily. He might be over eighty, but he wasn't cracked. Not yet. Anyway, there was nothing to be done about it. The police had plenty on their hands. He could hardly bother them with a non-burglary.

It was twelve o'clock on the following day and the Admiral, who had been attending morning service at St. Michael's Church, was surprised to find a police car outside his gate. It was Superintendent Queen, and he looked happy.

"We've nicked 'em," he said. "Had a tipoff on the telephone yesterday afternoon. Went round and found all the stuff stolen from the Estate in a sack hidden under that man Golding's caravan. The owners identified every bit of it. We've had an emergency meeting of the Watch Committee. No opposition this time. A unanimous recommendation. No license for Mr. Bailey next year. I fancy we've seen the last of him."

"What did Golding say about it?"

"Said it was a frame-up, naturally. But couldn't suggest who did the framing. It'll take more than a bit of fast-talking to get him out of this one."

"Excellent," said the Admiral. A suspicion of the truth was forming in his mind, too faint as yet to make consecutive sense. Certainly too faint to be expressed to the Superintendent.

As he consumed his solitary Sunday luncheon, the picture sharpened and gained definition. Small items were added to other small items until what had started as suspicion approached certainty.

He was clearing away the dishes when there was a knock on the door.

It was the two boys.

Colin, taking the lead as usual, said, "We've come to say goodbye. Our holiday's over. We've been ordered to go back and cheer up Dad."

"I'm sure you will," said the Admiral.

"It's been a super holiday," said David. "We'll be coming back next year, I hope."

"One thing you won't find here, I'm certain, is Bailey's Circus."

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The boys looked at each other. The faintest flicker of a smile crossed David's face. Colin was impassive.

The Admiral said, "And when did you learn the Morse code?"

There was a moment of complete silence. Then both boys burst out laughing.

David said, "I told you he'd cotton onto it." And to the Admiral, "How did you spot it? Were you able to read the flashes?"

"I've been reading Morse code since I was a midshipman. Was it you with the pram?"

"It was," said David, "and I nearly had a fit when I saw you behind me in the queue. I was glad we'd put the makeup on pretty thick."

"And in the pram, I take it, you had the stuff you'd lifted from Mrs. Garibaldi and the others."

"That bit wasn't much fun," said Colin. "We knew the houses were empty because we knew who lived in them and we'd seen them go out. But all the time, we were thinking, Suppose someone's been left behind? There was actually a dog in one, but luckily it was one we'd made friends with."

"I was scared stiff," said David. "We just nipped in, picked up the first things we could lay our hands on, and nipped out again."

"I see," said the Admiral. The boys looked at him anxiously.

"And the second part of your plan, which you also carried out successfully, was to leave the stuff under Golding's caravan."

"That bit was easy. It was away in a corner by itself. We'd spotted it through your telescope."

"And you gave us the whole idea," said Colin. "That Dutch skipper's wife and the baby."

"So I'm responsible, am I?" said the Admiral.

They guessed from his tone of voice that he wasn't going to make trouble and smiled at him engagingly.

He said to David, "I'd had no idea you were such an accomplished performer."

"Oh, he's a first-class actress," said Colin.

After they had gone, something in the tone of the last remark lingered in the Admiral's mind and stirred a memory. He pulled down his copy of *Who's Who* and turned to the entry under Bourdon, Sir David.

First there was a summarized account of his career in the Royal Navy. Then, in the terse shorthand of that compilation: "M. 1960

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Felicité, née St. Honorée (killed in air crash 1983). Two children: One s, One d."

"I suppose I should have guessed," said the Admiral as he shut up the heavy scarlet volume. He wondered if he should tell Jonas the end of the story. He would very much have liked to do so, but decided against it. Jonas was a solicitor and might have some compunction about a brute going to prison for something he hadn't done.

The Admiral had none at all.

DETECTIVERSE

ANATOMY IN CRIME

by DOUGLAS HARRELL

Inspector Dotson of the Yard
Was often heard to bandy,
"Sleuthin's mostly legwork,
But a fingerprint is handy."

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LOTTERIES! Play by mail. Send $3.00 for information package. Star Service, P.O. Box 284, Chesterfield, MO 63017.

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ELLERY QUEEN

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING ORDER FORM

Send to **ELLERY QUEEN MAGAZINE**
Classified Advertising Department/Suite 1401
380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017

20 WORD MINIMUM
Only $59.00 for 20 Words or Less
$2.95 each additional word
Capitalized words add—40¢ per word
SAVE 15% WITH 3 CONSECUTIVE MONTHS SAME COPY ORDER

DEADLINE: Copy and payment must be in by the 5th day of the third preceding month for issue in which ad is to appear.

(PLEASE PRINT OR TYPE)

YOUR NAME_____

FIRM (NAME IN AD)_____

ADDRESS_____

CITY_____ **STATE**_____ **ZIP**_____

PHONE:_____ **DATE:**_____

YOUR SIGNATURE_____

_____ Words at $2.95 each $ .....

_____ Capitalized word at .40¢ each _____
Total amount for 1 ad $

15% Savings with 3 Consecutive Months Discount

(a) Multiply one ad total $_____ x 3 = $ .....
(b) Multiply total amount on above line by __x .85__

(c) Total amount for 3 ads $

(Example. One 20 word ad $59.00 x 3 months = $177.00 x .85 = $150.45)

$_____ is enclosed for _____ insertion(s) in the _____ issue(s) _____ Heading

(FOR ADDITIONAL WORDS ATTACH SEPARATE SHEET)

(1) **$59.00**	(2) **$59.00**	(3) **$59.00**	(4) **$59.00**	(5) **$59.00**
(6) **$59.00**	(7) **$59.00**	(8) **$59.00**	(9) **$59.00**	(10) **$59.00**
(11) **$59.00**	(12) **$59.00**	(13) **$59.00**	(14) **$59.00**	(15) **$59.00**
(16) **$59.00**	(17) **$59.00**	(18) **$59.00**	(19) **$59.00**	(20) **$59.00**
(21) **$61.95**	(22) **$64.90**	(23) **$67.85**	(24) **$70.80**	(25) **$73.75**
(26) **$76.70**	(27) **$79.65**	(28) **$82.60**	(29) **$85.55**	(30) **$88.50**

HOW TO COUNT WORDS: Name and address must be included in counting the number of Words in your ad. Each initial or number counts as 1 word: Mark Holly, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017: 7 WORDS: Zip codes are not counted. Phone #: 2 Words. Symbols used as keys are charged for. City or State count as 1 word each.: Garden City, New York: 2 words. Abbreviations such as C.O.D., F.O.B., P.O., U.S.A, 7x10, 35mm count as 1 word. (P.O. Box 145 count as 3 words) Webster's International Unabridged Dictionary will be used as our authority for spelling, compound words, hyphens, abreviations, etc. **Please make checks payable to ELLERY QUEEN MAGAZINE.**

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IAN STUART (about a tidy little nest-egg)

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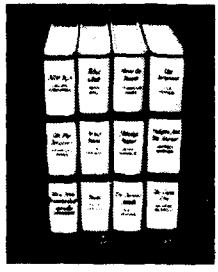

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Very simply posed:

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Cried the reader on Molokai.
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"To arrive in Kaunakakai?"

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*Detectiverse in December 1984 *EQMM*.

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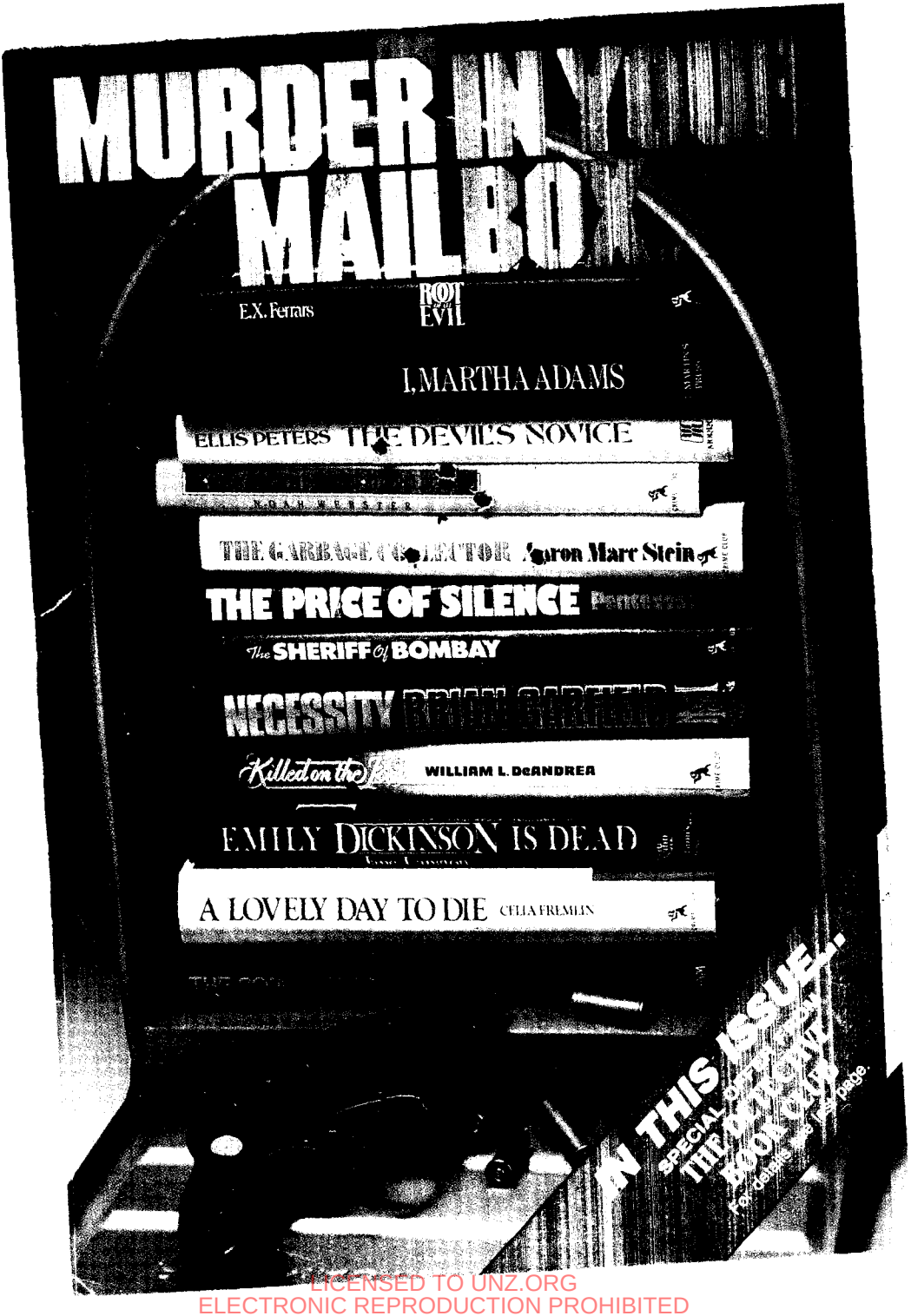

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